

Once Again 211

Chapter 211

It was a cold war. The 3-meter area between the two women felt like a demilitarized zone. The club members seemed to have noticed this as well, seeing as to how they weren't questioning their relationship. Maru gave Suyeon and Miso a glance before finally standing up.

"Didn't you say you had work, senior?"

Miso stood up with a bit of a glare.

"Fine, I'll leave."

The club members sent her off as Miso opened the door, Maru stepped out to give her a farewell as well.

"Thank you for coming."

"Oh, that's why you gestured for me to leave?"

"We can't just sit around playing forever."

Miso stepped down the stairs with a shake of her head, Maru tried to go back to the classroom but stopped after seeing Miso wave him towards her. He followed the woman downstairs. After leaving the building through the left gates of the building, they reached Miso's car parked nearby. Miso opened the shotgun seat to take out a small envelope.

"Come see us during the weekend. There are six tickets. It should be a good reference for the freshmen."

Maru tried taking out the tickets, it was a play titled 'Dreams of Lottery', running at 'Sky Cinema'.

"So this is the thing you prepared with Instructor Ganghwan?"

"That's right."

"It's not 'Statute of Limitations', huh?"

"Eh? How did you know about that one?"

"Do you remember how we put a chair in your car last year during the competition?"

"...No."

"In any case, I saw the script in the seats back then."

"Nice memory."

Maru thought for sure that she'd work on 'Statute of Limitations' when she told him that she was working with Ganghwan, mostly because Ganghwan always liked to work on plays that depicted humanity's dark side. The man did say that that was the genre he enjoyed the most, to think the play would be something so bright-sounding instead...

“You seem to be wondering why the title isn’t befitting of Ganghwan’s personality.”

“Was it that obvious?”

“A little. Well, there are adult problems. This play *is* produced by Ganghwan, but the investments came from somewhere else. Plus, it’s not like the guy hates romantic comedies. He just has a strange enjoyment towards making people frown, it’s honestly a bit troublesome how attached he is to it.”

“So the ‘Statute of Limitations’ is...”

“The play we’re doing after this one, he was the one who wrote the script as well. Geunsoo and I were recruited by force and I think you’re also being considered as well?”

“Me?”

“I thought he told you. Not yet?”

Come to think of it, Ganghwan did mention something about a play. Maru paid him little mind at the time, but this must be it.

“He really likes trying new things, doesn’t he?”

“We suffer because of it, even Mr. Junmin says he’s annoying to deal with.”

Miso got in the car with a smile, Maru tapped on the window lightly.

“Can you get us one more ticket, while you’re at it?”

“That woman has a lot of money, she can buy it for herself. Don’t you dare let her buy it at anything but the full price.”

“You’re surprisingly petty.”

“You ever tried being run over by a car?”

“...Goodbye.”

Maru bowed after taking a few steps backwards. After watching the woman’s car slide through the front gates, he returned back to the classroom.

“We’re pretty much done choosing roles, senior.”

They must’ve finished while he was away, he could see the roles and names written out on the blackboard.

“Park Daemyung, cop. Kang Dowook, delinquent. Jeon Aram, scammer. Ahn Bangjoo, drunk customer. Lee Jiyeon... a hostess?”

Maru had to pause for a second at that last part. They decided to take whatever roles they wanted since the gender for these didn’t matter in this play, Maru got the role he wanted almost immediately because no one wanted it. Indeed, that was why the top of the board had ‘Han Maru - Businessman’ written on it. The rest of the club decided to choose the roles amongst each other, but the role Jiyeon took really took Maru by surprise.

“A hostess? Really?”

“Yes.”

Jiyeon nodded confidently.

“She said she wanted the role almost immediately after you left. I’ve never seen her so confident about her decision,” Aram said.

Jiyeon told the girl off quietly from the side.

“I want to try it.”

She looked very resolved in her decision. Was it thanks to Daemyung? Well, Maru had no reason to stop her.

“Good luck.”

Maru sat back down.

“Feels like the club will do pretty well even without me,” Suyeon said as she walked to the blackboard.

She looked at the board relaxedly as she tapped her lips with her index finger. After scanning all of the roles, she turned around.

“You all got the roles that you wanted?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, we can always switch if things change later on. But if you end up not liking your role, you better tell me soon. I hate wasting time.”

Suyeon handed copies of script 3 to all of the club members, they were even tucked nicely in individual plastic folders. A bit different compared to Miso, who just gave the scripts to them straight as a stack of paper.

“Alright, write your name and role on the script before anything else. It helps to be able to see your role right away.”

They all wrote their names on the script under Suyeon’s instruction, Maru did the same with a pen as well. Script 3. The play was really called ‘I’ve been really wronged’, Maru smiled after scanning the script again. The story was simple, it was just a bunch of men complaining in a prison cell all day. It was somewhat philosophical, somewhat humorous, and sprinkled with a bit of social commentary. It was basically a small expression of a society contained in a little cell.

‘Businessman.’

It was the first word that struck out to Maru from the first page of the script. He liked the role, so he took it immediately. Thankfully, none of the other members wanted the role. Maru barely remembered what happened during his time in the office, but the emotions were all still there. It would surely help fuel his character.

‘It should be easy as well.’

It was easy to act out the roles you had experience in, that was the sole reason why he wanted the role. An easy role would allow him more time, the extra time that he could use to practice for the auditions.

“Alright, let’s sit in a circle.”

The club rearranged their positions and Suyeon stood in the middle of the newly-formed circle.

“We’ll do our first reading now. It’s easy. Just read. You’ve read from books in class before, right? This is the same thing. I’ll read the directives in the script, just read your lines when it’s your turn. You can put some feelings if you want or you can just read it if you want. We’re just figuring out what the play is like for now. But! Look into my eyes as you read. I know it’ll be stressful since I’m pretty, but try not to get too embarrassed.”

Suyeon smiled. She looked incredibly foxy, but she surprisingly didn’t feel annoying to look at. Was that skill? Even Dowook was too embarrassed to look directly at her. Probably because unlike most other women, every one of Suyeon’s movements exudes charm. It was almost as if she was constantly secreting pheromones from the curves of her body. Well, it was nice to see, so Maru decided he might as well enjoy it.

“Han Maru, aren’t you being a little too obvious with your gaze?”

“Well, you’re literally asking for it.”

The little banter made the club members widen their eyes. Did Jiyoong’s expression stiffen just now? Surely that was just an illusion, Maru turned to look at Suyeon with a surprised expression. The woman was winking at him playfully, she got him.

“Oh my, how bold.”

“...Let’s get back to the lecture.”

“I was just about to, Mr. pervert.”

She really couldn’t be taken lightly.

* * *

“They look really close together, right?”

Jiyoong nodded with a sad look, Suyeon and Maru looked very close to one another. Here Jiyoong was feeling the pressure just from the fact that Suyeon was a famous actress in dramas and Maru was talking with her as if he’s known the woman for years.

“Senior Maru was totally a surprise today. I thought he wouldn’t get along with women with his serious attitude, but he’s super handsome when he smiles. Though... Senior Dowook’s more handsome. Senior Daemyung’s... cute. I think it’d be fun to tease him.”

Aram giggled happily. Jiyoong wanted to laugh too, but she really just wasn’t in the mood for it.

“What the, why are you looking so tired today? You looked really energetic back in the classroom.”

“No, I...”

“Ohh, I think I might be onto something.”

“O-onto what?”

“Onto love!”

Aram put her hands on Jiyeon’s hips, Jiyeon fell down with a yelp when those hands started tickling her. When she looked up with a little sigh, she saw Aram smiling at her deviously.

“Tell me. You have someone you like, don’t you? In the acting club!”

“No!”

She ended up shouting, Jiyeon closed her mouth and stared at Aram. The girl was grinning. Oh no! Jiyeon started running, but Aram caught up in an instant. The girl approached her with malicious laughter.

“Lee Jiyeon, you better be honest with me.”

Aram approached her with her fingers curved like a claw, all Jiyeon could do was to shake her head with her hands over her mouth.

* * *

Bangjoo smiled when he saw a pair of black sneakers laying at the front door of his home.

“You’re home, sis?”

“Yeah!”

The voice came from the bathroom, on the dining table was a bunch of side dishes she bought. He put the dishes into the empty fridge and stepped into his room to change his clothes. Right then, he noticed something strange on his desk. A computer.

“Sis? Why’s there a computer here?”

“You’re in high school. About time you start needing one.”

Her voice echoed from the bathroom. Was she taking a shower? He did need a computer, so this was a pretty welcome addition to his room.

“So how much is this?”

“Around 2 million in total? Not sure.”

“2 million?”

“What, too cheap?”

“N-no.”

She was a monster indeed, one of the reasons why Bangjoo’s parents could leave him by himself with sound minds was because of his sister’s deep pockets.

“Food?”

“Make it for me!”

“It’s so late and you still haven’t eaten?”

“I starved just to eat your food.”

Bangjoo started preparing with a little sigh. His sister was very odd and scary sometimes, but she was still his precious sister.

“What about the thing you were filming?”

“Almost done. I might be here a few days, so make food for me in the meantime.”

“Just order in!”

“No!”

“.....”

Bangjoo didn’t argue with his sister often, because he knew he’d lose. He exercised when he was young solely because that was the one thing he felt like he could beat her in. Though nowadays he exercised to be an action star.

To him, his sister was a comfortable monster. Nice to deal with most of the times, but when she starts doing something odd... there was no stopping her.

“I guess I’ll make food.”

He didn’t want to cause trouble for himself down the line.

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“You should at least eat, you know. What are you even doing with all that money of yours?”

“Stop trying to scold me. Ugh, you used to be so cute when you were little, but now all you do is nag nag nag.”

Bangjoo’s sister sat down and dried her hair with a towel. It was black just a month ago, but now it was dark purple from her forehead to her ears and light purple all the way down.

“So you ended up doing that rainbow hair.”

“I’m done with this, actually. Pretty sick of it.”

“Aren’t you embarrassed?”

“Of what? Purple? Why?”

His sister picked up the spoon with a smile. Even now, she was a complete mystery to him.

“So how long will you be here?”

“No idea. I might be here for a while. I want to rest.”

“You can rest when you want to?”

His sister nodded with an “of course”.

“Where’s the sesame oil and soy sauce?”

“Here.”

“I love the egg rice you make.”

The egg rice, made by pouring sesame oil and soy sauce on top, with a sunny-side-up egg over rice. It was something their grandmother made all the time. Grandma didn’t actually like his sister, so she always gave his sister half of a fried egg. His sister always threw a tantrum for having so little, but grandma always refused to make any more. Bangjoo would sneak his fry onto his sister’s while grandma wasn’t looking, his sister was 28 at the time.

“Big sis.”

“What?”

“Did you visit grandma?”

“Of course I did. Ugh, that old lady’s still as healthy as ever. She scolded me over my hair as soon as she saw my face. Think she’s good for at least another decade.”

“Hey, you shouldn’t call her an old lady like that.”

“Well, am I wrong?”

“...Who was the person who ran to the hospital crying when grandma collapsed again?”

“Who was it indeed?”

His sister grinned. She fought a ton with grandma back in the day. Even now, actually. Grandma always urged his sister to get married, and his sister would always respond by refusing to live a boring life like their grandma’s. But as soon as his sister left home, grandma started always tuning into the dramas where she came out. On the other hand, his sister always asked Bangjoo about how grandma was doing. The two always fought on the surface, but they both cared very deeply about each other on the inside. Bangjoo used to be very confused by their relationship dynamic, but not anymore. They were just shy towards each other.

“You should call grandma instead of asking me.”

“It’s fine. I’m going to get scolded anyway. Also, hey, is it just me or are you starting to lecture me at this point? So you think you’re all grown up now, huh?”

His sister extended her hand towards him. Bangjoo could easily avoid her, but he stayed still. He knew his sister would chase after him to no end if he dodged, thus she shook his head around a little with a grin.

“So how’s high school? Is it fun?”

She let go pretty quickly.

“It’s fun. The classroom has a lot of weirdos, so I’m never bored. Club’s fun too.”

“Club? What do you do?”

“Acting.”

“Mm, acting. Here I thought you’d get into sports. Didn’t you like sports? I thought you were good at it. I thought you’d have a big advantage with your loud voice.”

“What does a loud voice have anything to do with sports? Also, I’m going to become an action star. Like Jackie Chan.”

“You?”

“What, I can’t?”

He put down his spoon and looked at his sister, his sister was smiling as brightly as ever.

“Do it! Be anything you want, but I’m not going to help you. I can feed you, clothe you, and put a roof over your head, but I can’t help you with anything more. No, I won’t.”

“You know I’m the one that makes the food and does the laundry, right?”

“But I’m the one that pays for all of this.”

“Lord, I need to find a job soon.”

“No way. Who’d make my food?”

Bangjoo sighed looking at his smiling sister.

“Aren’t you going to marry, sis? Isn’t it getting pretty dangerous at this point?”

Thirty-three. Bangjoo did see the news about people starting to marry at a later age, but thirty-three wasn’t early for marriage at all. Was it because of that? His family was always noisy on the topic of marriage when mom and sister met up. Mom said, “you did anything and everything you wanted till now, so just listen to me this once.” His sister responded, “but there are no good men out there.”

“You’re going to get screwed over by that rude mouth of yours some time in the future.”

His sister pulled at Bangjoo’s cheeks, Bangjoo smacked her away before continuing.

“Even mom’s asking me if you’re hiding anyone at this point.”

“What the heck? How old does she think I am?”

“I mean, with your job... It only makes sense that she thinks that. I still can’t believe you’re appearing on TV.”

The TV they left turned on in the kitchen was playing a makeup commercial. A woman wearing very tight silk clothing smiled as she showed off her smooth skin. Bangjoo looked at the woman once, then his sister once.

“The camera is a complete cheat.”

“The hell you talking about?”

Of course, people would buy the makeup when they saw his sister through the screen. Thinking about it almost made Bangjoo feel guilty, his sister wasn't beautiful like the woman on the television. She was the type of woman to laugh like a maniac in the middle of the night crunching on chips.

"Why did that company have to use you as a model?"

"Because I'm pretty."

"I don't think that's it."

"You've just gotten used to my looks because you saw it every day, you need to see what happens when I walk the streets of Myungdong."

"But nothing happened when we went to the market yesterday."

"That's because I didn't put on makeup."

"I feel so sorry for the people you tricked. It's a scam. A total scam."

"People always look and hear what they want. Satisfying their desires puts money in my wallet. I do what I want with said money. Bangjoo, you should write this down, man. It's good advice. Life runs on money!"

"Thanks for the *wonderful* lesson, sis."

Bangjoo stood up with his empty bowl. His sister was still smiling.

"...No one coming to your house recently?"

"Nope."

"Mail?"

"Nothing."

"You're really fine, right?"

"Who do you think I am? I've developed quite the tolerance to insults at this point. Don't worry about me. Plus, I have fans now! It's a little boring though. Should I start something on the internet again?"

"Please don't. Mom's going to collapse again if you do."

"You think?"

Bangjoo put the dish in the sink and turned the water on, he started thinking as he washed the dish. When his sister first appeared on the silver screen, the whole family was in high spirits. Everyone was happy when she got her first award and got all the spotlight in the country. Bangjoo remembered even though it was all the way back in elementary school, even his sister was ecstatic about getting closer to her dream.

But later on, his sister came back with a very scary expression on her face. She stepped down her drama role and started doing advertisements, everything from apartments to rice cookers. She started coming home less and less, and the negative comments about her on the internet only increased over time.

Mom read all of the comments about his sister and cried, Bangjoo remembered running outside all day when the sounds of his mother crying rang across the house.

“Sis.”

“What?”

“Why did you do that back then?”

His sister seemed to have immediately caught onto what he was talking about. She took some time to chew on the cookie in her hand before responding with a smile.

“I’ll tell you when you first get your paycheck. It’s a bit complicated.”

“Complicated my ass.”

Bangjoo rubbed the dish with steel wool. He wasn’t good with worrying about people. He always needed to ask what was on his mind whenever it came up, but he really couldn’t ask her about what happened back then. Especially because his smiling sister no longer looked so enthusiastic as she did just a moment ago.

“Want to go shopping together? We haven’t done that in a while.”

“You just brought a ton of stuff back home though.”

“We can just buy some more. I have a ton of money anyway.”

“Save some of that money for your wedding.”

“Ugh, don’t worry about it.”

His sister jumped up and pulled Bangjoo by his shirt, Bangjoo quickly washed his hands before looking at his sister. Once she made up her mind, there was no stopping her.

“It *is* a surprise, though,” his sister said as she tied her shoes.

“What?”

“You acting. I always thought you disliked that sort of stuff.”

“I never disliked it. Just... I was annoyed at the people who said weird stuff.”

“As expected of my brother! You’re always on my side.”

Bangjoo pushed his smiling sister forward.

“Come on, let’s move it. I have to look at my script after this.”

“Oh! A script! Need help?”

“I’m good.”

* * *

Maru massaged his eyes after taking them off of the script for a second, he was tired after focusing on it to memorize the lines. His focus when it came to stuff like this was incredible. It only felt like a few minutes went by, but it'd already been an hour.

Maru turned the computer on after pushing the script to the side, he entered the web page Miso told him about. The top of the page had the title 'audition' on it, nothing more, nothing less; it was a website for people in the industry. Most famous actors were cast all on their own, but many of the side characters had to use a site like this to find roles.

[Independent film 'Friendship' looking for male lead.]

[Film xxx looking for actors.]

[Film yyy looking for actors.]

Most of the postings were along those lines, some films didn't even have their names released. Then again, it made sense that blockbusters would have to take care of not releasing any information about the film. Among the articles, Maru found one written by a familiar name. JA Production. Junmin's company.

"...Well, this is basically a promotion in itself."

While the other articles only had from 100 to 200 views, this one had over 500. The name by itself must've made it worth it to a lot of people. The contents of the article were simple. It had the date and a job description.

"Free acting for five minutes, scripted acting for five minutes."

Free acting, huh. Maru stared into the screen as he scratched his eyebrows.

Chapter 213

Jiyeon smiled when she looked at herself through the mirror, she looked like quite the actress with a script in her hand. After joining the acting club, she tried watching an episode of an actor-centric TV show. Jiyeon stared dazedly as she observed the daily tasks of an everyday actor. Could she become like them, too? Despite being a novice? Could she also perform beautiful acts under the spotlight? It became her dream to have a handsome male actor appear from the side curtains, walking towards her and earning amazing applause from the audience.

'...That probably won't happen.'

Jiyeon returned to reality after a nice daze. She tried smiling at herself in the mirror and immediately had to turn away from embarrassment. She flopped down on her freshly-washed blankets and read the script over and over again. It'd been four days since they received the script, all they'd done during that time was something called reading. They'd just been reading out their lines in order. Apparently, this was important for learning the flow of the play, according to Suyeon.

It was difficult to even read the lines normally, pronouncing everything correctly was quite difficult. Maru and Daemyung seemed to have gotten a different instruction from Suyeon, seeing how some of their lines would come out with a different nuance every once in a while.

“Ah, say their line, not spit.”

Learning industry terms like this really made her sink into the reality that they were preparing for a play. Jiyeon loosened her mouth a little and bit down on her pen with her molars as Suyeon taught her. It looked pretty disturbing, but this was apparently good for fixing pronunciation. The act of biting down helped with loosening one's tongue. For sure, with the pen in place, Jiyeon couldn't move her lips as much when she talked. She needed to focus a lot on her breathing and the movements of her tongue for accurate pronunciation in a state like this.

“Is not lik yo becom dirty because you drink.”

She tried reading ‘It's not like you become dirty because you drink’ just now. The pronunciation was abhorrent, but it was still noticeably better than it was a few days ago. Just as she tried to reposition herself and try saying the line again, the door opened. Jiyeon quickly took the pen out of her mouth and looked awkwardly at her mother at the door.

“What are you doing?”

“U-um...”

She hadn't said anything to her mother about acting just yet, her relationship with her mother was awkward from a young age. She recalled following her mother very well when she was young, but at some point, they grew apart. Even more so than her father, who was working in a foreign country.

“Stop doing weird stuff and get to studying. You should think about changing if you ended up getting to an engineering school. How long are you planning on living life so haphazardly like that? Don't you ever think we can't take care of you forever?”

“...Yes.”

Jiyeon didn't dare raise her head, she didn't have the courage to meet her mother's sharp gaze. Her mother slowly closed the door. Just before it completely closed, her mother's voice slipped through the door's cracks.

“Aren't you already ashamed of having to go to an engineering school?”

Jiyeon stared at the now-closed door for a second before taking out a textbook from her bag. Study... she should do it. It wasn't like she slacked off in middle school. She took notes during classes, she also previewed and reviewed class material in an academy after school. She just couldn't get good grades during tests. Her notes were very popular among her classmates for being so neat, but her grades were still amongst the lowest in her class. She knew the reason why, since she was always sick around test season. Her stomach always hurt during tests and she would struggle with breathing. She could only focus so well with her terrible body and her grades always hit rock bottom.

It actually started becoming a common pattern at some point. She always used to hear that she was good at studying in elementary school, things changed once she was in middle school. Jiyeon thought she was broken, that's why she gave up on a humanities school for an engineering school instead. She went to a meeting with her homeroom teacher with her mother, she could still remember that expression her mother made when the teacher suggested an engineering school. Mother apologized

later, of course, but Jiyoan would never forget that expression of wrath, disgust, and hatred directed straight at her. That was probably when their relationship started deteriorating.

Jiyoan shook her head, all these negative feelings weren't doing her any good. Instead, she took her time organizing lecture notes from math class. She beamed at her equations for a second before taking out her sketchbook, the sole hobby she had. There were two reasons why she went to an engineering school. First, her test scores were bad. Second, it had a design class.

Jiyoan would feel her heart calm down whenever she drew something with her pencil, the paper was free from all the competition and shame that she was subject to in the real world. She didn't have any desire to work in design, but perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad idea.

Just as she started sketching out her pencil sharpener, she heard the front door open. Was mom going outside?

"Welcome, welcome."

She could hear her mom happily greet people inside, Jiyoan felt her heart start to race. Should she pretend to be asleep? Or should she run out saying she needed to buy something for school? Right then, her door opened. She could see women around mom's age sitting in the living room through the crack.

"You should say hello," mom said, before turning around.

Jiyoan awkwardly stood up and stepped in front of the guests.

"Hello."

"Oh my, Jiyoan, it's been such a long time! Do you remember me?"

The woman in the brown sweater asked. Jiyoan couldn't remember who the woman was, but she responded with a 'yes' anyway. It was an awkward situation regardless of what she did, so she just stood in her place dazedly. The guests were talking with each other happily. Jiyoan wondered if she could go back in, but her mom called her to the kitchen.

"Here, carry this."

She carried the plate of snacks and put it in front of the guests, it was expensive tea and chocolate from Japan.

"Oh my, you're so cool, president-to-be. These look so expensive!"

"My husband sent it to me from where he's working right now."

"He was in Japan, right?"

"Yes."

Mom laughed with a hand over her mouth, Jiyoan wanted to step back into her room but had to sit back down because one of the guests stopped her.

"You should have some as well. Your daughter is so pretty, by the way. She must take it from you."

"No way, she resembles her father more."

Jiyoon looked down from a sense of incredible futility when her mother stroked her thigh gently. Her mother was scolding her just a moment ago for not studying, yet now she was treating her so nicely? The change in attitude stabbed Jiyoon like a needle.

“You must have it so nice. Your husband is talented and your daughter is so pretty.”

“Please don’t bring me up so much. Don’t you have two very handsome sons as well?”

“Sons are nothing special. Daughters are where it’s at nowadays. Hyunsoo recently brought back a girlfriend from his American college, and my, it’s like he cares more about his girlfriend than me now.”

A lady wearing rounded glasses spoke out from next to the brown-sweater lady.

“Come to think of it, Hyunsoo’s in the middle of his Phd in the US, isn’t he?”

“Yes. Neither I nor my husband is very smart, but Hyunsoo is, thankfully. He’s gotten all sorts of scholarships and grants, so he doesn’t even need any support from us.”

Jiyoon could see the brown-sweater lady’s smile start to widen. On the other hand, her mother started speaking less and less.

“It must be nice to have a son like Hyunsoo.”

“Oh, you’re too much, Mijin’s mom. Oh, I heard the news by the way. Mijin got into a big company recently, right?”

“He didn’t even go into grad school! He said he wanted to start working right away.”

“He’s good enough to get right in without even more studying, so it’s completely fine. Hyunsoo should be jealous of Mijin. Ah, Mijin was in Seoul University, right?”

“Yes. I’m so thankful that he grew up well.”

“Our Hyunsoo also used to study there until he transferred. Ah, what university did Yangsoo go to, by the way?”

The lady on the left side of the brown-sweater lady opened her mouth quietly.

“Yangsoo’s still in high school.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. He’s in Minsa high, so it’s hard to see him these days.”

“Lord, wasn’t that the school where the students have to wear hanbok?”

“That’s right. He was preparing to apply for foreign colleges before he cut contact. What a cruel boy.”

“I’m sure he’ll be kinder after growing up. He’s smart, after all.”

Now, the ladies turned to look at Jiyoon. Jiyoon was starting to find it harder to breathe, it felt like there were a bunch of snakes hissing at her. She would get bitten the moment she did something wrong. She turned her head to look at her mother, who was quietly sipping her tea.

“Aren’t you in high school, Jiyoong?”

“Yes? Ah, yes.”

“Which school are you going to? The most famous high school around here is Gwangchun, so it has to be that, right?”

“Has to be.”

“Or a science school. She looks very smart. Pretty girls are so good at studying too nowadays.”

Jiyoong twiddled her fingers for a moment before responding quietly.

“I-I go to Woosung High.”

“Woosung High? What’s that?”

“Ah! Could it be the engineering high school from next to this place?”

It was just a fraction of a second, but Jiyoong could clearly hear the mocking laughter coming from a few of the guests.

“...Yes.”

Her voice became even quieter. Quieter and quieter, out of the fear that others might hear her.

“I see.”

That was the end of that. After a few seconds of silence, they started talking again about the beautiful interior of the house. Only then did her mother finally break her silence and start talking again.

Jiyoong quietly stood up and went back to her room after a curt bow, she was exhausted. Her heart was beating furiously, it felt like she was taking another test. She needed to sleep, she didn’t even have the energy to open her eyes. As her eyes closed, she heard the ladies speaking outside. The one sentence that really stuck out to her was ‘Jiyoong’s mom has it very hard’.

“Hah.”

Jiyoong forced a smile, but she couldn’t stop her heart from trying to calm down. She felt sorry for her mother and disgusted at herself for no reason.

* * *

Sunday morning. When Jiyoong stepped out of her room, she couldn’t stop thinking of what happened yesterday. She gave her mom a glance from the dining table.

“Have some breakfast.”

“...Right.”

Toast, milk, and fruit. Her mother didn’t say a thing during their meal. She finally opened her mouth as Jiyoong put the dishes back in the sink.

“Jiyoong.”

“Yes?”

“Let’s go to an academy again.”

“Academy?”

“This won’t do at all. You just can’t get good grades because you aren’t trying hard enough. You need to relearn the basics down again by going to school. There’s nothing wrong with going to an engineering school. You just need to go to a good college.”

Mom picked up the phone as she spoke. She started getting into it with a ton of unfamiliar terms, then started explaining things in very fluent English. Mom quickly put down her phone after hanging up.

“We’ll start with math first and then English. You were good at math, so we might as well start with that.”

“.....”

“Why aren’t you saying anything?”

“Mom, I...”

She wanted to say she couldn’t go because of club activities, but she just couldn’t speak it out loud. It almost felt like she forgot how to talk for a second. She looked at her mother as she bit her lips in frustration, making her mother frown.

“Why are you stuttering so much? You didn’t use to be like this. You used to be so bright in elementary school. What happened? Could it be... You aren’t getting bullied, are you? Are you?”

Her mother stood up and grabbed Jiyeon’s arm, she pulled up Jiyeon’s sleeve to check her arm. Of course, there weren’t any bruises since Jiyeon wasn’t being bullied. After checking her body for a few minutes, her mother finally let go. Her mother put a hand over her forehead with a frustrated look.

“Jiyeon, I just can’t understand. Why did you change like this? You used to be such a good child. You used to smile so much. So why...”

Jiyeon was unable to say anything to her mother. Instead, she ran away. It was difficult to stay at home. She had club practice in the morning anyway, so she might as well go there instead. After arriving at the bus station, she entered a store to recharge her bus card. She asked the store clerk to recharge her card.

“P-p-please c-charge my... card.”

“What? Charge?”

Jiyeon nodded. She avoided the clerk’s odd gaze. It felt like she was stuttering more today for no reason. Calm down, calm down. Jiyeon stepped out with the newly-charged card.

Chapter 214

“I’d never have thought I wouldn’t feel any annoyance about going to school on a Sunday. What a travesty.”

Maru spoke as he changed into a pair of slippers. The weekend was a government mandated day of rest. A kind of day where the law allowed you to watch TV after waking up late in the morning, eat brunch, and spend the afternoon with a cold beer.

“It’s so sad that I’m not part of the working class.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Dwook stepped up the staircase first with a glare, Maru licked his lips as he followed behind the boy. It was slowly transitioning to mid-April at this point, a season known for its lethargy. Maru felt especially worse around this time. He had plenty of time to sleep last year during this season since he was just a stage manager, but not anymore.

“Why are you looking so tired today?”

“You try being as old as me. You’ll realize how disgusting it is to have to work over the weekends.”

Maru yawned loudly. Hopefully, he’ll be back in peak condition after this week. After arriving on the fifth floor, Maru and Dwook opened the door to their club’s classroom.

“No one’s here yet.”

“Not even Daemyung?”

Maru looked around as he asked. Daemyung was always on time, he was never late last year either.

“Oh, there’s his bag,” Maru discovered.

“You’re here?”

Daemyung stepped up behind them with a drink and ice cream in hand, he must’ve bought them from the supermarket near the school.

“Dude, you’re gonna get fat again like that.”

Dwook said as he bit down on the ice cream bar Daemyung gave him, Daemyung’s been drinking a lot of soda recently as well. He lost quite a bit of weight back when Miso was training them, but he gained all of it back during the winter break.

“I-I should lose weight. I can do it. Probably...”

Ahh, the thing that countless women like to say all the time. To this date, Maru could count the number of women he’s seen actually succeed in losing weight with just his hands. Maru pat Daemyung’s shoulder as a gesture of encouragement. It’s alright. Men just need their wallets to be thicker than their belly.

“Lord, we’re getting lazy.”

Maru laid back on the class floor with a bar in his mouth, the coolness of the floor in contact with his back was a pretty welcome one. Maybe he could enjoy what little of the weekend he had with this.

“Dwook, you didn’t get to see the props yet, did you?”

“Props?”

“They’re right behind the container behind the school. Want to see?”

“No, it’s annoying.”

“I-It’ll be good to take a look at.”

Daemyung was full of energy ever since he stepped up as club president two days ago. He said he couldn’t do it when Maru first talked about it, but he finally gave in after a bit more persuading. Objectively speaking, the boy was more empathetic than Maru. He would be better at communicating with the kids, he should be able to take care of any issues that arise very easily as well.

‘I can just give them a scary look every once in a while.’

Good cop, bad cop. There was no better position than this. Also, the role of a club president just had too much work that came with it. Maru had no reason to take the role since he had nothing to gain from it either. He would’ve continued with it if Daemyung was dead against it, but thankfully that was not the case.

“You were supposed to be support staff, so of course you need to see it. You should get a grasp of what you need to make in the future.”

Maru gave Dowook a slight nudge as well. In the end, Dowook rose up from his chair with furrowed eyebrows.

“Fine, fine. Ugh, the two of you are just...”

Daemyung took Dowook downstairs. Dowook had a surprising amount of sense in him, it’d be nice if he could fix that attitude of his. The boy wasn’t swearing as much anymore, but the delinquent air about him hadn’t gone away.

“Is he trying to look like a gangster?”

Well, he *was* popular with the girls. He seemed to be getting along with the all-girls high school next to Woosung High still. It looked like he stopped talking to them for a while after the Changhu incident, but that’s changed since winter. As a matter of fact, the girls from that school would even come to find Dowook at their school on occasion. A lot of students asked Dowook to set dates for them as a result and Dowook was able to use that to melt back into the classroom.

Bada’s face quickly crossed Maru’s head, but he quickly dismissed it. She asked him a while ago to introduce her to Dowook. Maru said no right away, but she was persistent. She was silent since the new semester began, thankfully, but Maru still got chills on his back whenever she came to him with a smile.

Dowook was a good guy, for sure. He would make a great boyfriend. He wouldn’t hesitate to give Dowook’s number if anyone else asked for it, but not his sister.

Honestly, Maru didn’t really care who his sister dated. He hoped that she would meet a good person, but that was just hopes in the end. He trusted that Bada could take care of things well. He’d keep a close eye on her since he already knew she’d divorce in the future, of course, but he had no intentions of doing anything during her school years.

'Not Dowook, though. Nope, never.'

A friend of his, dating his sister? Good lord. What a terrifying thought. The saying about how friends should never become family was a saying for a reason, he didn't want to be caught between the two's relationship at this odd middle ground. His sister would tell him, "You know, Dowook..." and Dowook would go to him, "You know, Bada..." He'd have to constantly mediate their fights.

If a person he didn't know at all made his sister cry, he could fight any day of the week. But if that was a friend? Maru felt his head go blank just thinking about it. The two of them both had quite the temper as well. It was Maru's duty as an older brother and a friend to keep the two from ever meeting each other. Plus, he needed to survive.

"I'm sleepy."

He felt sleepiness wash over him as he thought about stupid things. Mid-april was a tiring month indeed, it was so difficult trying to stay alive when energy was being constantly sapped out of him. He dazedly looked out the classroom door, the walls were beige and the floor was made of marble. Right then, he noticed a round head poke into his vision. It was Jiyoong, walking up towards him from the staircase. Watching her leaning on the wall for support was a dreadful sight.

Maru stared at Jiyoong, she hadn't noticed him just yet. She was looking forward, but her mind was clearly preoccupied. She'd probably get into an accident walking like that. Indeed, he noticed Jiyoong trying to take another step up after coming to the end of the staircase. She'd lose her balance doing that.

"Hey hey!" Maru shouted.

Jiyoong snapped back to reality and checked her foot. She slowly put it down after a flash of realization. "A-ah, hello."

An awkward greeting, Jiyoong stood in her place with an odd look. Maru frowned. Was she sick?

"Are you just going to stand there?"

"Ah."

Jiyoong let out a tiny moan and stepped into the classroom. It was starting to get warmer already, but Jiyoong looked like she just ran through a snowstorm with how pale she was.

"Are you sick?"

"N-no."

"Really? You should rest if you're sick. You're going to get hurt like that."

"I-I'm really fine. I'll stay here."

Jiyoong spoke with her two fists over her knees, she looked very stiff from nervousness. What was wrong with her today?

"Are you really fine?"

“Y-yes.”

Jiyoon wasn't even looking at him, she wasn't the type to avoid eye contact in a conversation. What happened to her? He wanted to say something but closed his mouth for now, he wasn't good at consoling people. “So there were more than that last year?”

“Yeah, we had to throw out more than half.”

“Sounds difficult to deal with, maybe I shouldn't have come here after all.”

“Hey, don't say that.”

He could hear Daemyung's and Doowok's voices coming from the hallway. Perfect timing.

“Jiyoon.”

“Yes?”

“Do you like hot chocolate?”

* * *

Daemyung looked at Jiyoon sitting next to him, she looked frail. As soon as he came back to the class, Maru asked them to go get some hot chocolate. They left Dowook to sit around in the classroom and went down with Jiyoon. As they waited for their drinks, Maru whispered to Daemyung that Jiyoon didn't look okay.

- Good luck, pres.

Maru left, excusing himself to get a drink for Dowook. There was an awkward air around the bench next to the store, Jiyoon was just staring dumbly down at her cup.

“Um, Jiyoon.”

“Yes?”

Jiyoon raised her head rapidly, she looked surprised. Daemyung himself was surprised by her sudden response. Why was this girl so nervous?

“I don't know if I'm just overthinking it, but you didn't look okay today...”

He trailed off nervously, he wasn't good at consoling people either. Maru was the one really good at this stuff... Well, he was asked to do this, so he might as well try his best.

“...Is that so.”

Jiyoon drank her hot chocolate with a nervous look, Daemyung sipped on his drink as well. He felt a bit nervous over talking one on one with a girl, but that feeling quickly subsided over the fact he was talking with a junior right now. A junior that needed help at that.

Daemyung fidgeted as an unexpected silence surrounded both of them. Did he say something wrong? Maybe he shouldn't have asked about this to begin with.

‘Hopefully, that's the case.’

He'd developed an immunity to misunderstandings and people ignoring him already. It was sad that a junior of his might look at him badly, but at least that would mean she didn't have that big an issue. Just as Daemyung finished his drink and thought about leaving, the girl opened her mouth.

"Do you feel like you're suffocating when you talk with your mom, senior?"

Jiyeon bit down on her lips.

* * *

"Agh! So hot!"

Aram flopped down on the floor as soon as she arrived. A bit of her shirt rolled up to reveal her belly, but she didn't seem to care at all. Maru sighed as he threw Dowook's jacket over her stomach.

"Ooh, senior, you have great manners!"

Dowook shouted at him, "hey, that's mine!" from the side, but Maru ignored him.

"It'd be nice if Jiyeon had half the energy you did."

"Why?"

"Do you really need to ask?"

Aram smiled at that, Dowook walked over to take the jacket back from her.

"Senior Dowook, you're so cold! You're not going to be popular with the girls like that."

"Do you want to die?"

"Ooh, want to spar?"

Aram stood up and assumed a fighting stance. Come to think of it, she practiced Taekwondo, Judo, and Kendo, didn't she? Maru gave Dowook a slight glance, the boy was stepping back with an annoyed expression. Mm, Aram seemed to be a predator to him.

"Hello! I am here!"

Bangjoo stepped into the class with an incredibly loud voice, he was holding expensive looking boxes wrapped in silk on both of his hands.

"What's that?"

"My big sis got it for us to share."

Share? Bangjoo started unwrapping the boxes after putting it down. When he opened the cover, they found sashimi inside.

"Sashimi?"

"Yes."

Sashimi? In a high school club? It looked really expensive. There were beautifully carved fruit and sushi inside as well, definitely not anything you could buy at a local store. To begin with, the container it came in was made from real wood as well.

“What’s wrong?”

“Your sister really gave you this?”

“Yes.”

“...Your family must be rich.”

Maru was treated with a lot of expensive foods in the past, so he had no issues getting an estimate of how much this cost. It’s cheaper than the really expensive sushi for sure, but this definitely wasn’t the type of food you treated kids with.

“This is why I said I didn’t want it, but my sister insisted.”

“...Well, might as well help myself to it.”

Maru was eyeing the eel sushi. He was feeling tired recently, so he might as well use that for some recovery. Sashimi was one of those things you didn’t want to spend too much money on even if you had the cash on hand, so this was an incredibly welcome gift. Just as he was smiling proudly at the food, Suyeon arrived. She widened her eyes looking at the shining sashimi.

“You guys are in a whole different class, aren’t you?”

Well, it was a gift, so they might as well enjoy it... that was the conclusion they reached.

“Where’s Senior Daemyung and Jiyoong, by the way?”

Bangjoo asked.

“They’ll come back soon.”

The two of them entered just as Maru finished speaking, they didn’t look so good though. Jiyoong looked as nervous as ever and even Daemyung was frowning.

‘What the hell happened?’

Maru looked at the two as he scratched his eyebrow.

Chapter 215

They went into practice with gusto after the sashimi. Sadly, a problem arrived when they started their reading. They just needed to read their lines, but Jiyoong wasn’t even able to do that.

“Please do not... No, Please don’t look at me like that. I-I may sell alcohol... woman... but...”

“Stop.”

Suyeon gathered everyone’s attention with a club. Like always, she was in the middle of the circle of club members. Suyeon looked down at Jiyoong, who slowly began to lower her head.

“Lee Jiyeon.”

“...Yes.”

“Do you just not want to do this?”

“No.”

“Is there some problem then?”

“...No.”

“Do I have a problem, then? You were fine just yesterday, and now you’re reading like this. You have the passion and you clearly don’t have a problem, so there must be something wrong with me?”

“I-I don’t think that is it.”

“Lee Jiyeon, raise your head.”

Jiyeon slowly raised her head, she looked incredibly exhausted.

“Do you have something to tell me?”

“.....”

“Alright, I can’t do this. I don’t think I’m trusted by you still, it can’t go on like this. We can’t do anything if you don’t even have the basics.”

Suyeon grabbed her bag, her eyebrows were furrowed in incredible annoyance.

“We’ll end here for today.”

Suyeon tapped Jiyeon’s head before stepping out. Jiyeon seemed to have words to speak, but her mouth wouldn’t open. Maru asked Daemyung to take over and followed Suyeon. She was standing next to the third-floor staircase, she must’ve waited for him.

“I’ve tried one on one before, but group work is way more tiring in comparison.”

“Complaining when we’ve just begun?”

Suyeon shrugged.

“There’s an issue with Jiyeon. Unfortunately, I’m no good at taking care of girls her age. They require way too much extra care.”

“Why couldn’t you scold her like last time?”

“There are days when you can do that and there are days when you can’t. She had passion last time, but she just looked dead from the start today. She’d really get hurt if I scolded her. She needs someone to rest on at times like these, but I forgot how to be that someone.”

Suyeon winked.

“You care about her quite a bit. I’m surprised.”

"I told you, this is homework on my end as well. I don't want Junmin to be disappointed. But at the same time, I don't want to think about profits and losses with a girl that age. She's so cute, too."

"So it's not that you just don't want to get involved?"

"Oh? Hey, don't look at me so badly. I don't try to hide from a girl that small. Besides that, you should try hard to console her. She's really out of it today, it's like she's a completely different person."

Suyeon's eyes started trailing upstairs. Maru had to agree, Jiyeon was stuttering even with the short lines today. She hurried to finish her lines like she was in a poorly scheduled interview and even got them wrong. Afterwards, she just dumbly gazed into her script. She wasn't like this before.

"Talk to her. I'm no advisor, so I can't do much on my end."

"Why don't you talk to her separately."

"It's fine. I don't think you guys noticed, but I did. She's incredibly wary of me, I'd appreciate it if you could find out why for me. You saw her today, right? She lost her breath from such a short line. You know it yourself, she wasn't that bad before."

Maru nodded.

"I'll help you as much as I can, obviously. But I'm not going to get involved in stuff I can't handle. I came here to guide your acting, not console all of your lives."

"You won't become a good teacher at all."

"Don't want to be. I'm an actress. Anyway, get going."

Suyeon stepped down the staircase lightly. After watching her disappear from his vision, Maru walked back into the class with a bitter look. The class was silent, as he had expected. Jiyeon's eyes were glued on the floor like some sort of a sinner, they definitely couldn't continue with practice like this.

"Lee Jiyeon."

Maru stared into her eyes as he approached her. He wouldn't be able to reach her deeper thoughts, but perhaps he could get an idea of what was going on with eye contact. But no matter how deep he looked, he couldn't get a word bubble out of her. That could only mean one thing, her mind was an incoherent mess. He couldn't do anything here other than to buy some time.

"Anyone want something to drink?"

* * *

He stepped out to buy drinks with Daemyung. As soon as they got to the staircase, Daemyung spoke with a wary expression.

"I think I gave her the wrong advice."

Daemyung was clearly very agitated.

"Speak slowly. What did you tell her?"

“...It was family stuff. Also personal stuff.”

“Well, what was it?”

Daemyung paused with a closed mouth, he looked very troubled. He must be wondering if it was okay to talk about this. He was being very considerate and polite, but now really wasn't the time for either of these things.

“I can only ask her myself if you don't tell me, but I don't think that'll be easy to do. Also, my mouth isn't very light.”

“Right, of course. Hah... I don't think I should've done this, you would've been way better than me.”

Daemyung stopped talking as he organized his thoughts, he only opened his mouth when they passed the front gates of the school.

“She had some trouble with her parents. She didn't explain all of it, but I think they're too overbearing on her. Jiyeon also had some personal issues.”

“What is it?”

“She says she gets really nervous at important moments, especially during tests. Or whenever she's the center of attention. She doesn't know what to do because her heart starts beating too fast. I told her everyone gets that, but she said it was a little different.”

“Is that all? That doesn't sound so bad.”

“...I gave her some advice regarding her parents.”

“What did you say?”

“That they were saying these things just because they cared about you. I know it doesn't help, but I didn't know what else to say. You think I made it worse by saying that?”

Maru looked far into the distance, everyone says advice like that. Trouble between a child and their parent wasn't an uncommon issue, not many kids maintained a good relationship with their parents throughout their entire life. If Jiyeon's fight with her parents was what ruined her condition today, then they definitely didn't fight over something normal.

“Jiyeon didn't look like she got hit anywhere, did she?”

Daemyung blinked for a second until the question really registered to him.

“Are you...”

“It's just a possibility. I didn't see any bruises on her.”

“Me neither.”

“She must've been hit by something big if her behavior changes this drastically overnight.”

“That's... true.”

Jiyoong was in an absolute mess today, almost as if she left her mind somewhere else. They shouldn't approach her thinking it wasn't anything special, they might end up ruining a family if they did so.

"Alright, you should talk to her one more time. If she hides things, then don't approach further."

"What? Maru, we should help her."

"There are limits to how much you can help someone. How much do you know about Jiyoong? I just know her surface personality and her name. Do you think it's right to dig deep into her matters just because you know that much?"

"I still want to help her."

Daemyung spoke with his eyes wide open. The boy just couldn't let her go, could he? This was probably because of how much of himself he sees in her. Maru understood the boy's feelings perfectly well, but it still wasn't a good idea to pry so deeply into other people's matters. Especially if the matter at hand was about family. Jiyoong was just a normal junior, so there was no reason for them to pry deeply into anything. Of course, things would be different if she was actively seeking help, but... if she wasn't, there was no need to help.

"We'll help if she asks for it. But if she doesn't, just observe."

"She might just not be talking about it because she's nervous."

"You want to help her no matter what?"

"...Yes."

"Will you take responsibility if something goes wrong?"

"What?"

"It could be way more serious than you think. If you end up making the situation worse, all you'd be doing is making things harder for Jiyoong. I won't stop you if you really want to help, but don't go about it lightly. Nothing hurts more than misdirected goodwill."

"...I still want to help."

"Of course."

It could just be a simple matter, all it really came down to was to ask the person herself. The two of them bought some sodas and headed back to school. As they passed the front gates, they passed a woman with purple hair. She was looking up at the school curiously, she turned to look at them. Unlike her wild purple hair, she had a very innocent looking face.

"Eh? Eh!?"

Daemyung shouted in surprise. Was this someone he knew?

"What's up?"

"Don't you know who she is?"

“Who is it?”

“Don’t you watch dramas?”

“I really don’t.”

“.....”

The purple-haired woman walked towards them with a bright smile, as if she found someone she knew. Upon a closer inspection, Maru found that the woman didn’t look as innocent as he first thought. She looked incredibly playful, probably someone difficult to deal with.

“Are you guys in the acting club?”

“Yes, we are.”

Maru answered since Daemyung was busy hiding behind him.

“Don’t you know me?” the woman asked, pointing at herself.

“Do I need to?” Maru answered.

“Wow, I haven’t gotten a reaction like that in a very long time! How fresh!”

The woman wrapped her arm around Maru’s shoulder out of nowhere, Maru pushed her arm away with his hand immediately.

“Do you have business with the club?”

“You speak like an adult, that’s so cute.”

She was looking all over him like he was a strange creature. It was rude, but it didn’t feel odd, probably due to her lack of malice. Looking into it, he found a small word bubble pop up.

[This kid is fun.]

It’d been a while since he saw someone who spoke exactly like how they thought. These people were typically the ones that can be trusted, but...

“Do you really not know me?”

They’re really annoying to deal with, Daemyung pulled Maru back by the shoulder.

“She’s an actress, an actress!”

“An actress?”

“Ahn Joohyun! You really don’t know her?”

“Ahn Joohyun?”

The purple-haired woman grinned.

* * *

There were two reactions when they entered the classroom. Most stared at her with a curious look, while one person shouted in shock.

“B-big sis!”

Maru guided Joohyun in as he heard Bangjoo’s scream, the woman looked around the room like she was doing a house tour.

“Why are you here?”

Joohyun completely ignored her brother as she observed each of the club members.

“So this is where you act. I’ve never done this in high school, so I got curious. Nice atmosphere. But... You look like you’re going through something.”

Joohyun leaned forward towards Jiyeon, Jiyeon looked around in absolute confusion.

“U-um...”

When they both looked at each other at eye level, Joohyun hugged Jiyeon and stroked the girl’s back gently.

“Why do you look so troubled? You’re too young to go through emotions like this.”

It was a warm voice that knocked any sense of nervousness out of a person, Maru pulled Daemyung back from approaching them.

“What?”

“Look at Jiyeon.”

Daemyung relaxed after looking at Jiyeon’s face, the girl was breathing calmly. She still looked confused, but she looked much better than before.

“It’s good to take deep breaths when things become difficult. Like this.”

Joohyun started breathing very slowly, slowly enough to drive out all the negative emotions. Maru could see Jiyeon’s shoulders starting to relax, she looked comfortable for the first time today.

Maru watched the two with his arms crossed, this Ahn Joohyun person was clearly not a normal person.

Chapter 216

Today was gray all throughout. One of those days where she spent in her life that felt completely meaningless. One of those days when her heart desperately searched for someone to blame, despite knowing that she shouldn’t. And her target in the end, after scrolling through countless familiar faces... was herself. Why was she so pathetic? Why couldn’t she even say a single thing? Why did she stay quiet? If she could just wash away that nervousness in her. If only she could be a good daughter to her mother... Every hypothetical situation increased the burden to her conscience and it slowly dragged her down deeper into a pit.

There was a big empty hole in the middle of her head. She stuttered at even the short lines, she couldn’t even breathe without being consciously aware of it all the time. In the midst of it, Daemyung’s words

stabbed into her ear, your mom says that because she cares. That's right, he was right. Her mother does care, care more than anyone else. That was why she needed to meet her mother's expectations, she needed to get into a first-class university just like the children of all the other guests from that time. She needed to be a good daughter.

But she was lacking in talent. She couldn't meet her mother's expectations, she made her mother lose face again. She ruined the club as well, she betrayed her seniors' expectations of her.

She couldn't do anything right.

Her heart started beating louder, cold sweat was coming from out from her pores. It was just like during test season, just like when she couldn't even ask for her bus card to be recharged. She couldn't even get simple tasks done. Jiyoong felt her mind get dragged deeper into the abyss within her heart, but she couldn't even ask for help. She could only sit there wondering when everything would end.

Right then, an unfamiliar woman appeared in her vision. No, she recognized this woman from television. This actress from a commercial she's seen was approaching her with a smile and hugged her. Jiyoong tried to push the actress away in surprise, but she was only hugged tighter. The warmth comforted Jiyoong, her heart was starting to slow to match the beat of the actress'.

"Things won't be fine, it'll stay hard. But why don't you take a breather for a second? You don't need to stay motivated, you don't need to try hard. Just lean on me and take a breather."

Jiyoong's hands fidgeted a couple of times before relaxing her arms entirely, the energy in her body was spilling out like she just entered a warm bed. Her nervousness melted away as well. She followed the actor's slow breathing. Slowly, slowly. She breathed in through her nostrils and breathed out through her mouth.

"Right, good."

Jiyoong recalled her mother's caress from the actress' hands on her back, her mother used to be so comforting and kind back then. So comforting.

* * *

Joohyun let Jiyoong go after a very long hug. Jiyoong looked very shocked, but nothing like earlier.

"How are you feeling now?" Joohyun asked.

Jiyoong said she was fine with a very quiet voice.

"That's good."

Joohyun stood up with a smile.

"Big sis, why are you..."

Bangjoo stepped towards Joohyun with a surprised look.

'So that was his monstrous sister?'

She was more strange than monstrous, really. Joohyun winked when his eyes met with hers.

“So this is the script?”

“Big sis!”

“Lower your voice, man. You’re being rude to everyone in this building.”

Joohyun picked up the script and took a seat in a chair. While she read, Maru gestured Bangjoo to come towards him.

“So that’s your sister?”

“...Yes.”

This was the first time Maru saw Bangjoo so quiet, the boy was looking at Joohyun with a terrified look.

“She’s not normal at all just like you said. I heard she’s a famous actress?”

“I didn’t try to hide it purposely, I just didn’t think it was anything special.”

“Well, it would be pretty stupid to advertise that your family member is famous.”

Maru stepped closer to Joohyun, who raised her head to look at him.

“Um...”

“Hold on. After I read this. Ok? Got it?”

Joohyun was reading the script like a child who got her favorite toy, Maru could only smile at her childishness.

“Understood. Please take your time.”

Instead, Maru turned to Jiyeon. The girl looked a lot better than before. The redness in her cheeks indicated that she was filled with energy once again.

“You look a lot better now.”

“Ah, yes.”

“That was surprising, wasn’t it?”

“...Yes.”

Jiyeon was touching her hair out of embarrassment. Well, at least this was over. Now, all there was left to do was to wait for Joohyun to speak. Aram ended up asking Joohyun for a picture midway, Joohyun accepted the request with a grin.

“Sis, I’m totally a fan. I listen to your radio every morning!”

“Thanks. But give me a bit. There’s not much of this left.”

“Of course!”

Aram was smiling happily. Dowook seemed to have recognized Joohyun as well, but he clearly didn't care. He just read his script from his corner of the room, but seeing how he kept giving the woman the occasional glance, he clearly cared a little bit.

Joohyun closed her script loudly. The scene wasn't long, so it didn't take her a long time to read through it.

"Fun. I like stuff like this. I'm jealous. I was always the one to watch plays because my school didn't have an acting club. But doing it is super different from just watching it, right?"

Joohyun scanned the club with a smile, who nodded back to her. Maru stepped forward to Joohyun again.

"Could I ask what you came here for?"

"Mm, if I had to put it in words, I was just super bored at home. I didn't want to play by myself either. I also didn't want to spend my break like this, so I got this amazing idea of visiting my younger brother. So that's why I'm here. I did a good job, right Bangjoo?"

She gave Bangjoo a slight wink, Bangjoo coughed like he choked on something and looked away. Maru was surprised. A woman in her thirties was so overtly trying to act cute, but it didn't look weird at all. If only his girlfriend could learn a thing or two from her...

"Your younger brother is Bangjoo?"

"Right. He was born super late, so he's a very shy boy. Isn't that right, Bangjoo?"

"Ugh, sis!! Why are you here?!"

Bangjoo had cold sweat running down his face as he spoke, Maru never saw the boy this agitated before. What a sight.

"Are you guys preparing by yourselves?"

"No, we have an instructor, but she left early."

"Really? Can I join then?"

"Sis, please go home. I'm sorry for whatever I did."

Bangjoo started begging. Maru gave Daemyung a glance, who nodded and put a hand over Bangjoo's mouth.

"We'd love it if you joined. You're an actress? We'll have a lot to learn then."

"I am an actress, but you didn't know me."

"Now I do. Isn't that good enough?"

"You have a way with words. Fine, I'll hang out for a bit. It feels like Bangjoo might cry if I keep staying. Mm, I don't want to overstep my boundaries, so I guess I'll just give you a few pointers. Sounds good?"

"That would be good too."

“Looks like you’re the leader, at least by the atmosphere.”

Leader, huh.

“That would be him behind me.”

“Him? Hm, I don't think so. You’re the one talking to me right now. You’re also the one everyone’s looking at right now.”

“Real leaders never do the actual leading in public, I’m basically a secretary.”

“Naaah, I don’t think so. Well, we can discuss that later. Besides that, Mr. Secretary.”

Joohyun motioned him towards her, so he took a step forward. Joohyun gestured him even closer, so Maru ended up leaning more towards her.

“Why did you leave her be? She looked sick,” Joohyun whispered.

Maru gave Jiyeon a slight glance before responding.

“There were a few reasons?”

“Reasons? What do reasons have anything to do with this?”

Maru looked at Joohyun. She seemed unhappy with his answer. Well, he might as well explain it to her in detail, since she did help.

“I saw a few signs that I shouldn’t get involved so hurriedly.”

“So you just let her be?”

“I was planning on asking her. Or helping if she wanted it.”

“No, you don’t leave hurting kids like her by herself. She didn’t need consolations or answers, she just needed a hug. This is unexpected. I thought you’d catch onto it since you’re such an emotional kid.”

“...You know me?”

“I saw you once last year. You were the kid that was running wild on stage. I got excited just by looking at you flail about wildly. That’s when I realized that you’re just like me. But you weren’t, as it turned out. You turned out to be a cowardly intellectual. I’m not disappointed, but it's a surprise.”

Her droopy lips definitely looked disappointed here.

“Were the actions you showed on stage also calculated?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I never go on stage without something in mind. So it’s probably calculated.”

“No, that’s not really it. I don’t think you really know yourself. Why is that?”

Joohyun thought for a second before changing the topic with a smile.

“Well, I guess we’ll find out on the set.”

“The set?”

“Yeah. Weren’t you auditioning for the delinquent role? I’m going to be there during the scene, so I’ll find out then. Ah, I am going to assume that you’ll get the role of course. Teacher has his eyes on you, so I’m pretty confident that’d be the case.”

She must be talking about Moonjoong here. So she was also part of ‘Twilight Struggles’ as well?

“Are you the first wife, by any chance?”

“Bingo! Don’t tell anyone. It’s a secret.”

Maru blinked as he stared at Joohyun, so she was the other main character in the movie. She was unlike any other actor he’s met before. Miso was the emotional type as well, but not even she was like... this. Joohyun’s acting almost seemed to be based on pure instinct.

“Since Teacher seems to have great expectations for you, I’ll give you a little gift.”

Joohyun lowered her voice before continuing.

“An actor who thinks too much can’t smile and ends up acting out his smiles instead.”

Joohyun grabbed Maru’s ear and pulled him even closer, Joohyun whispered incredibly quietly.

“Also, if you’re a man, shouldn’t you try to protect a scared lady in front of you?”

Joohyun pushed Maru away with a click of a tongue, Maru looked at the woman in front of him in confusion. It’d been a very long time since he last met someone he couldn’t figure out.

* * *

“Alright, I should go!”

It felt like a storm passed by over them. Instead of giving them all some advice, Joohyun talked about her trip to Bangkok for an hour straight. She finished her story and decided to leave.

“Come again, sis!”

Aram was the only one who gave Joohyun a happy farewell. Everyone else, including Maru, lingered with blank stares.

“Yo, Mr. Secretary, get over here.”

Joohyun motioned him closer to her. He didn’t want to go, but it didn’t look like she would leave without speaking to him.

“She’ll be fine today, but you’ll have to take care of her. Got it?”

“Yes. I’ll take care of it.”

“Good. Also, did you learn acting from one person?”

“No. I had help from a lot of people.”

“Izzat so? How long did you do this for?”

“Less than a year.”

“Huh, I see. Out of curiosity, did you do everything you wanted when you were on stage last year?”

“I think I did what I wanted.”

“Hm, I’m asking what kind of advice you got before you went on stage as well as whether you followed it or not. For instance... you might have been told to rein yourself in a little.”

Maru didn’t answer. What in the world was this woman?

“So I’m right. I got it. Here’s my second gift. An actor who doesn’t get to the bottom of his emotions is bound to run dry. Think hard about what that means.”

With that, Joohyun stepped down the staircase.

Chapter 217

‘Reining it in, huh.’

When was the last time Maru was pushed to the extremes of his emotions? He couldn’t remember the last time he got truly mad or emotional in life. Even though he cut out most of his anger from his life since he knew it does more harm than good, he’d never thought himself logical. This was just an attitude in the 45 years he previously lived, the ability to look at a situation and call it as he sees it.

He had no intentions of denying that he was a calculating person. Some people believed calculating people to be cold, Maru wasn’t one of them. He thought being calculating was just another facet of human nature. So, trying to decide if that aspect of a person made them human or not felt foolish to him.

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He recalled how emotional he used to be. He went on a trip without his phone without warning and he made big life decisions without giving it much thought. He started his road manager job without much thought. As a result, he became a bus driver. One that left his poor wife and daughter alone by dying. He didn’t think he lived a bad or unhappy life, he actually thought he was quite blessed. Just... he wished to be able to enjoy that blessing just a little bit more.

“Thank you for the advice, but I don’t think it’d be very useful to me,” he told Joohyun.

Joohyun raised her head to look at him with narrowed eyes, she was clearly waiting for him to say more.

“I definitely don’t know much about acting. I’m studying it, but all I’ve learned is that it’s very difficult. I still look incredibly awkward following actors on the screen, this is why I’m learning right now. I heard a lot of things. Try this, try that. I didn’t know a lot, so I tried all of it.”

Joohyun turned around fully to face him, Maru took it as a sign to continue.

“I got comments to rein myself in as well. I do get very riled up on stage. I don’t have tunnel vision nor do I stutter, thankfully. I actually become better at being aware of the audience than usual. It felt odd to be told to rein myself in in that situation, but I did it anyway. Because I was only a beginner.”

“And then?”

“When I suppressed my emotions, I was able to see my companions next to me with clarity. It felt like my vision was pulled back from the audience to the stage. My excitement from before was gone, but I became able to observe the play with a cool head. After that experience, I realized that the instructor’s advice wasn’t wrong.”

“But holding your emotions back means that you can’t show off your potential as much. Do you think actors get to be on stage whenever they want? Countless actors disappear without before they can even flourish their talent. They need to show off everything they have if they even want a shot at succeeding. You’re getting ready to jump into an industry like that.”

“That’s true.”

“So that’s why you need to express all of your...”

Maru shook his head, Joohyun looked at him annoyed.

“I’d rather not challenge myself without the utmost confidence that I’ll come out on top. I’d like to step forward slowly and surely. I’m confident that I’ll eventually get to express all of my emotions with a cool head in the future that way.”

“You’re not wrong, but I told you. That’s not easy, especially not at your age. How many incredibly famous actors do you think are in their teens, let alone their twenties? There are probably a few around the world, but they’re far and few in between. We say people like that are blessed, they’re the real geniuses. But disregarding them... Most famous actors in Korea are in their thirties, forties. They only truly reach the limelight in their fifties. Get what I’m saying?”

“Acting is proportionate to life experiences?”

“That’s right. Acting, in the end, is about expressing yourself. That requires a lot of seeing and thinking. That’s why age is scary. Age is absolute. You can’t make up for that with talent. At least, not in acting. Even famous young actors lose their light in front of side actors who worked for decades, that’s what age brings to acting. You can’t get life experiences from books. That’s why you need to purge your emotions as fast as you can. So that you can have a weapon to face those that already matured.”

Maru stared directly at Joohyun.

“Was that what you did, senior?”

“I was like an intern at a theater company until I was twenty four. I was a student that believed I’d succeed so long as I tried hard, but I never got a chance even after several years of learning. I even kicked away a few chances granted to me because I didn’t know how to handle it. That’s when I got into a short TV drama and that’s when I thought to myself that I can’t improve with just practice. So I just left everything to my emotions instead. People insulted me at first because I stood out too much for a side character. It was supposed to be a short scene, but I acted as if my life depended on it.”

“So, did it work?”

“I got cast for the next short TV drama the director did, he told me to go wild. That’s when I realized, I can always control my emotions and hone my talent after purging everything inside me. Only after I learned how much I can smile and cry could I really begin to learn to improve myself.”

Joohyun pulled out a hair tie and tied her purple hair behind her, she looked completely different with a simple change. All of a sudden, she looked more like a wild horse than a teasing woman. This is probably what she’s normally like.

“I’m not saying you’re wrong. But it’d take too much time for you to shine with that method. Some people are better at gaining experiences than others, but the amount of experience you can gain in a given time frame is limited. If you’re planning on ending acting as a hobby, then... I suppose it doesn’t matter. But if you want to get into the industry, you better show everything you got. Even if you have to ignore someone else’s command.”

She was full of confidence. After all, she had her entire life to back up her words. Words from people like her were always filled with life and power, they were the type of people who could persuade people in a flash.

Maru shook his head. She was right, at least in her case. Maybe her advice applied to him as well, maybe he might get a different result if he purged his emotions. A new path might open up in front of him, one he didn’t think about before.

“Your words definitely make sense. Maybe I’d be able to try something new if I followed it, whether it be good or bad. Isn’t that right?”

“Right. That’s exactly it. You’ll find several instances in life when you have to take the chance given to you. In your case, that would be the movie. This audition. Teacher has a ton of expectations for you, this is a side character that’s as important as the main character. How many chances like this do you think you’ll ever get in your life? He didn’t tell me this directly, but during a meal, he told me he had someone in mind for the delinquent role. Many people know that someone is you. You’ll be able to learn a ton if you come in.”

“And I’d need to adopt a new style of acting to be able to take advantage of that chance?”

“When you’re desperate, you need to take a risk. You can’t get an edge over everyone else by doing the same thing as them. Teacher won’t give you extra points just because he likes you. If you don’t get in his eye during the audition, he might just forget about you forever. This is how important this is.”

Bring a change to his style. Go against the advice that Miso, Geunsoo, and Ganghwan has given him. Let his emotions overtake reason. He understood what Joohyun wanted, it was sensible advice.

But was that something that Maru would do? Maru took a step back with a smile.

“Thank you for your advice.”

That was the end of that, he already got his answer.

“Looks like you’re not interested.”

“Right. I’m satisfied as is. I actually found a reason to keep going down this path thanks to you.”

Joohyun smiled oddly.

"If you understood me right, you should know that this is a critical moment for you."

"You are right. There are many people that have their eyes on me on this audition. I know that if I get a role here, I can advance very quickly into the industry. That's why I should be more careful. I need to prepare and hone my skills instead of taking a risk."

"There are rumors all over the place about this movie already. How many people do you think are going to come to the auditions? Do you think you can beat veterans with decades of experience under their belt? With just a single year of experience?"

"In some ways, yes. I might even be better than them if what you said about life experiences was correct."

"...Are you sure you heard me right?"

"Loud and clear."

Joohyun shrugged after a brief moment of confusion.

"That's odd. I can tell you're not being confident for no reason. You really think you have something here."

She tapped her lips for a second before shaking her head.

"Well, I'm sure you'll do well. But don't you dare regret your decision later down the line. The chance you missed won't come back no matter how much you regret."

"No need to worry. I'm very good at handling regret. I make it so that I wouldn't have any in the first place, all thanks to the fact that I'm a calculating person. I take what I'm confident of being able to get. It might not be fun, but so what? I was just born like this. I've taken many risks so far already, with acting and relationships alike. I'd like solid results at this point in life."

"I don't think you're at an age where you should worry about that yet."

"You might be surprised, but I'm a lot older than I actually look."

"Hah, funny joke. Anyway, I'm of the opinion that you should break your shell before you become another cog in the machine. The younger you are when you do it, the better."

"But if your sense of self is already well-established, there is no need to breakthrough. I'm not brave enough to stake all of my worth in a single bet, I love playing it safe. Even when crossing a stone bridge, I have to smack each brick in front of me at least three times."

"What if you fall behind everyone else?"

"That's completely fine, life isn't a short track race. I'll catch up eventually, so long as I don't trip and fall along the way. I might find my own tricks and start moving ahead. More so than that, I'm me and you're you. We all have our own ways of doing things."

Maru moved solely based on evidence and proven methods, he never broke this rule even when he took risks. That was the method he came up with after his forty-five years of living. He no longer had the passion and courage of youth left inside him, but he had the maturity at the very least.

More so than that, he's had an incredible experience that no one else had. The fact that he looked death in the eye and came back alive. That moment, Han Maru as a person became someone 'more'. He could look at himself objectively. And because of it, he looked a lot colder to people he didn't really care about. He was fine with that because that was yet another aspect that characterized him as "Han Maru".

"You... you're an interesting kid."

"Not really."

"Fine. If you're that confident, prove it to me. Good luck."

Joohyun stepped back down coolly as if she had finished business here. After a few seconds though, she ran back upstairs to Maru with a grin.

"Take good care of Bangjoo!"

"Ah, yes."

"I'll kill you if you bully him."

"Uh, right."

"Take care of that Jiyeon kid quickly as well."

"I understand."

"See you next time! Buh-bye!"

Joohyun ran down with a whistle. What an odd woman.

'45 years. That would surely become a great weapon for me.'

If one's ability in acting directly correlated with their life experiences... Fine. He's experienced all life had to offer so far. Sweet, sour, salty, spicy, bitter. He's tasted it all. Meaning, there was no need for him to change his acting style. While others gathered experience, he only needed to hone himself.

'I suppose there is a need to empty my emotions though. To get myself to the bottom of my emotions, as she put it.'

Maru smiled quietly.

Chapter 218

'Alright, I'll handle Jiyeon first.'

Maru called Daemyung out to the hallway with his phone.

"How's the club right now?"

"They're all asking Bangjoo a bunch of questions."

“Jiyoon?”

“A lot better than before. She’s smiling at least.”

“That’s good. She was really hard to approach a while ago.”

“You really should be the one talking instead of me...”

“Nope, this needs to be done by you. She told you her story, so handing the baton to me is going to hurt your credibility. You’re also the president.”

Daemyung paused at the word ‘president’.

“Um, Maru...”

Maru knew exactly what the boy wanted to say, so he cut Daemyung off.

“Just take this to the end, I’ll help you. You should talk with Jiyoon. She’s calm now, so this shouldn’t be as difficult as before.”

“I don’t know what I should say. I feel like I’m going to give her useless advice again.”

“I’m not telling you to go in without a plan. Here, I’ll give you some useful advice. You guys need to talk about her relationship with her parents first. The thing with her heart during tests might actually be a real health issue, so we can worry about that later.”

“What do I tell her?”

“You’re not bad at talking as long as you stay calm so just remember two things. First, find out if Jiyoon has bad feelings against her parents. If she hates them, cheer her on a bit and end the conversation. We definitely can’t touch that.”

“If she doesn’t?”

“If she likes them, but she’s in constant turmoil with them, ask her this.”

“What?”

“Ask her, ‘have you ever told them what you want face to face?’”

* * *

Daemyung looked at Jiyoon nervously.

After coming back to the classroom, Maru dismissed the club. By the time everyone started leaving with their bags, Daemyung asked Jiyoon to come to talk with him privately. This was because Maru believed that Jiyoon might feel pressure from being singled out of the group with everyone present. After that, he moved forward with the conversation according to Maru’s advice. Since Jiyoon was a lot calmer than before, things went pretty smoothly. Daemyung was able to learn some new things and he could carry through with the conversation with the new information.

He was able to get an understanding of how Jiyeon thought of her mother. Surprisingly, Jiyeon cared a lot about her mother. She was beating herself up too much because of her inability to meet her mother's expectations, this feeling of hers exploded when the guests came over last time.

Daemyung was enraged from hearing what the guests said about her, to think they would look down on someone else's child just because they were so proud of theirs... Daemyung even called them 'damned cackle of crones' out of sheer anger. His face reddened with embarrassment when he saw Jiyeon staring at him in shock, but he was satisfied with what he said after seeing a smile float on her face.

Their conversation continued, Jiyeon started telling him more and more things after a certain point. Daemyung listened quietly. Jiyeon started dialling further and further back into the past into her memories with her mother. At the time, her father was in Korea as well, so they went travelling a lot. But after her father moved to Japan for work in sixth grade, she started getting sick during tests.

Jiyeon looked very bright when she talked about her past. She didn't stutter either. Daemyung had a feeling that this was an easy problem like Maru told him. The trouble only began because her communication with her parents was severed, so Daemyung asked Jiyeon a question. The one that Maru told him about.

"...I don't think I have. Mom didn't look like she wanted to talk to me."

"How about you try it, then?"

Jiyeon's mother in her memories was a person who kindly listened to their child's words. Maybe they were just misunderstanding each other deeply? Even parents and children misunderstand each other from time to time. Actually, it was probably because they were so close that they got so many misunderstandings.

"I'm afraid my mom might get disappointed. She's already disappointed about having a daughter like me, so if I rebel..."

"I was actually the same..."

Daemyung smiled, thinking back to himself before meeting Maru. Jiyeon apologized. She was a nice kid. She apologized too much, but Daemyung could tell that they were all sincere. Meaning, Jiyeon still had the energy to empathize with others when she was already going through so much pain. Could parents so easily hate a child who was as kind as this? No. No way. There had to be a misunderstanding.

- If you decide to help someone once, you need to take responsibility until the end. That's what it means to help. At least, to me.

Daemyung felt a lot of things from that line Maru told him. He really wanted to help this girl, not just give her his condolences. He wanted to truly be of help to this person.

"I'm not actually good at many things, but I'm good at listening. If nothing changes after talking with your mother, I'll listen to your story many times over. You can just complain to me all day if you want. So could you please try this once?"

Daemyung felt his cheeks burn up with embarrassment, at least he was being honest. A silence formed between them. Jiyeon only opened her mouth after two minutes of staring at the floor.

"I'll try it. I think I'm getting a bit of courage thanks to you. Breathing's gotten easier for me as well."

"R-really?"

He got the answer he wanted in the end, Daemyung felt the energy sap out of him. He had no idea consoling someone was this difficult. How did Maru manage to do all of this? Being a wall for someone to lean onto meant that you had to share their pains, Daemyung had no idea how Maru could shoulder so many painful stories from other people.

'If I take on consoling as a job...'

He had no idea how much the club members would even rely on him, but at least he could try to be of help. For Maru's sake.

"...Thank you. This is the first time I talked like this."

"No, thank *you* for telling me your story."

Jiyoona smiled, making Daemyung's chest flare up with pride.

'Looks like it's over for now, thankfully.'

He told her everything, so he just needed to send her back now. Daemyung turned to look at Jiyoona.

"I've kept you a while. You should go now."

"What about you, senior?"

"I need to organize some of the props."

"I'll help."

"Nah, it's just sweeping the floors, really. You should go. You have something to do, don't you?"

Daemyung spoke as he opened the classroom door, Jiyoona hesitated for a second before grabbing her bag. She stopped in front of the door to look at Daemyung, her cheeks were a little pale.

"...Are you sick again? Tell me if you're dizzy."

"N-no. It's nothing like that."

"Really? I thought you ran into another problem. Thank goodness. Take it slow just in case though."

"...Right."

Jiyoona turned back with her head drooped down, Daemyung waved her goodbye. Their eyes met for a second when Jiyoona turned her head, but for some reason, she immediately looked down again. She must be embarrassed after telling him her life story.

'I mean, I would be as well.'

"I won't tell anyone your story from today, so don't worry."

"What? No, that's not really a problem..."

“Oh, really? I’ll keep it a secret anyway.”

Daemyung waved again, prompting Jiyeon to finally start walking towards the staircase. Only after seeing her walk out of his vision did he finally sigh, this took way too much out of him.

“Phew, at least I acted like a proper senior for the first time.”

The word ‘senior’ sounded a lot different to him for some reason today. It made him... feel a sense of responsibility, he planned to be a good senior from now on.

* * *

Jiyeon was so engrossed in a single thought during her journey back that she didn’t even remember her bus ride, she took a deep breath in front of the door before stepping inside. She took her shoes off and stepped into the living room. Her mother was looking into the accounting book.

“Wash your hands and have some fruit. I also found a list of academies so choose one from there. Your Mondays and Wednesdays will be math, and you will spend the other days working on English. I’ll also get a tutor in a bit, so keep that in mind.”

Jiyeon felt her heart start thumping loudly again, her eyes kept drifting back to her shoes at the front door. She could easily escape this if she ran away again. Maybe she should go on a walk? Her fingers started moving towards her shoes. Right then, a voice echoed in her head.

- No, thank *you* for telling me your story.

How would he look at her if she turned around now? Daemyung was listening to her surprisingly stiffly today, she could tell he was having a hard time listening to her. Despite that, he gently listened to her story with a smile. She didn’t want his efforts to be for naught.

She balled up her fists as she walked up to her mother, she decided not to think about anything else at least for the moment. Her mother looked up with a straight face, it’d been a very long time since they looked at each other face to face.

“...Mom.”

“What?”

“I need to tell you something.”

Her mother frowned as she turned back to the accounting book.

“If you’re going to tell me you don’t want to go to the academy, I’m not going to hear it.”

“...I don’t want to go to the academy.”

She squeezed the words out of her, her mother slapped the accounting book closed with reddened eyes.

“What is wrong with you! Why are you hurting mom so much?! Why... How did you change like that?”

“Mom...”

Jiyoon wanted to run away, she was scared. She was scared and angry at herself for making her mother like this. Right then, she noticed her own fists next to her. A sign of her having made up her mind, she'd talk properly with her mother this time.

She won't run.

Jiyoon sat next to her mother and looked directly at her, her mother was closing her eyes with a hand over her chest. That wasn't a sign of anger, but sadness. Jiyoon observed her mother for a bit more, she's never seen the expression her mother makes after this.

Her mother slowly opened her eyes after a shake of her head. Jiyoon noticed her mother's eyes shake for a second. Was it because she was in front of her?

"Mom, I need to tell you something."

Jiyoon told her mother her story. The fear of tests that developed since middle school. Those moments when she couldn't breathe and started getting cold sweat. She told her everything.

"Jiyoon... You... what..."

Mom stepped forward to look at Jiyoon more closely, her fingers were trembling. Why did she suddenly look so fragile to Jiyoon?

"Why didn't you tell me? Why?!"

"Because I thought you'd worry. You were really sad after dad left. I... I wanted to help you." "You still should've told me if you were hurting!"

Mom slapped Jiyoon's wrists in anger. Jiyoon was unable to stop her emotions after that, tears started flowing freely on her face.

"But, but you always had this scary face on when I tried to tell you. And you kept scolding me when I messed up. I was scared. I was really scared."

"Jiyoon..."

"I wanted to do well too. I wanted to do well! I wanted to be your proud daughter and I wanted to be someone you could brag about. But I can't! They looked down on me because I went to an engineering school! The other kids always tell me I'm really good at studying. And I helped improve their scores with my notes! But I can't. I want to, but I can't do it. I hate it too. I hate that I'm like this. But if I tell you, it's so obvious that you're going to hate me more, mom. You'd worry about me too. I didn't like that. I... I... wagh.."

She wanted to sound logical. After a certain point words just started pouring out of her as they came. She couldn't even see well with her vision blurred over, she kept talking regardless. And after what felt like ages of her just talking...

Her mom hugged her.

Jiyoon didn't stop crying. The one thing she noticed in the chaos was that her mom was crying as well.

"I... mom was..."

She couldn't hear the rest of it, Jiyeon raised her hands to hug mom tightly as well. What would happen when they both stop crying?

There were a lot of uncertainties to her right now. The only thing that was certain though was that looking at her mother would no longer hurt so much anymore.

"My daughter. My sweet, kind daughter."

Jiyeon cried her heart out as she felt her mom stroke her hair.

Chapter 219

"So there's a week left now?"

"Yes."

"To think that they'll only hold one round of auditions... they're quite evil. Even though they know how many people will flock to it."

"What can we do about it? They're the ones making the decisions. Rather than that, have you heard? I heard that one person from every nearby acting school is taking a jab at it."

"It's not just one. There are many places who have sent profiles of two to three people. Sheesh, how many people are flocking to just a side character role?"

"Since there's delinquents 1, 2 and 3, they're picking three right?"

"It's not for sure. They can adjust the number to their liking after all. Also, there's no mention of that in the notice. It's pretty much decided that they're looking for people for the thug roles, but it's not like that's the only side character role available. I can kinda get a grasp on the number from the novel, but it's hard to get a concrete number since scenes may be taken out or added."

"Who are you going to send, mister Choi?"

"Me? I told everyone to send their profiles if they want to do it. It's quantity over quality. The net must be fine, but a fish should get through if I stuff enough of them inside the net."

"I heard they're holding the interviews first this time."

"Jeez, they're taking unnecessary steps. They might as well be Broadway."

"You're going to tell your students to participate anyway, aren't you?"

"I can't help it. Rather than that, who did you decide to send, mister Lee? You sent some of your students to create promotion materials, so you don't have anyone, do you?"

"I had everyone else go."

"What the heck? You're not that different from me."

"Well, isn't this audition mostly related to luck? Though, the free acting does nag me a little."

Mister Choi drank some coffee. The acting schools in Gangnam became active after quite a while. This movie was fully created by JA productions, from investment to production. JA company mostly dealt

with the production of dramas until now, but this time, they were trying their hand at the movie industry. Rumors about that spread around wide amongst the acting schools, and not long later, visible results started coming out.

“It seems like Lee Junmin, that guy is trying to do something big.”

“I heard that Yoon Moonjoong and Ahn Joohyun were confirmed to be main characters. That’s half a big issue in itself.”

“That’s why everyone is trying to dip their hands in it. A close film director friend of mine was making plans to produce a movie along with a smart producer, and that producer happened to have a close relationship with a talented film director. He’s quite famous for getting good camera angles in this area. He just happened to be free at that time as well. So the two of them quickly put together a team, but when they met him, it turned out that that fella’s team wasn’t doing business at all. The two of them tried to convince him saying that he needed money to live, right? But he said that he is getting paid. The producer was smart and immediately knew what was happening. So he asked who was paying him. It turned out that....”

“JA was holding on to them since last year?”

“Yeah! That’s when the rumors started spreading. Moreover, with the addition of rumors that Yoo Chulmin fella was talking to JA, everyone knew that something was going to happen.”

“Yoo Chulmin? You mean the president of the Acting Association? Didn’t he take his hands off work altogether? As far as I know, his only job nowadays is to mediate between the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the theater troupes.”

“Who else do you think called the retired Yoon Moonjoong back to the scene? Everyone knows that the two are on close terms.”

“Then Yoo Chulmin, Lee Junmin and Yoon Moonjoong - these three formed a team? I didn’t know that much.”

Mister Choi took a bite off his donut. Mister Lee also leaned back on his chair and took a deep breath.

“Getting a role in that movie will be harder than a camel going through the eye of a needle. The ones backed by Lee Junmin and the ones backed by Yoo Chulmin will get all the major roles.”

“Then this audition might be just to tell everyone that they aren’t keeping everything to themselves?”

“You figured out just now? Most commercial movie auditions are split into several stages, aren’t they? Because that many people audition for it. On top of that, they will at least have to give a chance to the ones backed by popular schools. They don’t have much time. But the fact that they’re only having one stage audition this time means that they pretty much have all the roles sorted out already and the ones remaining are merely dregs.”

“Does anyone you know get a script, mister Choi?”

“There are some who got the script. They even did an unofficial audition. But they all failed to make it. It seems like they’re respecting the original author’s opinion a lot.”

“What does a writer know about movies?”

“Well, that was supposed to be the condition or something. Anyway, I need to get someone in there, even if it’s just a minor character. It will help promote our school.”

“I heard the principal of Star Academy is going to send food trucks using his own money.”

“That dude is quick when it comes to things like that. He’s trying to make a good image of himself.”

“We should send blankets or something.”

Mister Choi nodded. Although the scenario made him feel that not a lot of money was needed to make the movie, the confirmed actors alone were super expensive to cast. Moreover, the ones participating in the production of the movie were all people that were well-known in the movie industry. It would definitely help if his name was known to them.

“But I heard that the actors for the minor roles will have to completely empty their schedule for three months.”

“For three whole months?”

“Yes.”

“They can’t take other roles elsewhere?”

“They can’t.”

“Wow, that’s just crazy. Just how many times are they planning to reshoot each scene? But the fact that people chose to remain means that the pay is good?”

“Probably.”

“Now I want to have a look at that contract. Just how much are they paying?”

“More than enough, probably.”

“More than enough, huh.”

“If I can contact them in the future, I should ask them if they need any staff. It would be profitable if I can get a connection with them.”

“I should do that too.”

These days, many movies stopped in the pre-production phase, but now a movie with super popular actors was about to kick off. The acting schools were all on their edge, and the theater troupes should also be busy as well. Once the concrete details about the audition comes out, it would be a war. Mister Choi thought back to a few of his students with potential as he looked outside the window. At that time, mister Lee brought out an interesting topic.

“Oh yes, I heard that an interesting kid entered Film.”

“Film?”

The acting school, "Film", was well known for its sturdy infrastructure even amongst the acting schools in Gangnam. It was to the point that their 'special lectures' were held by famous actors. They did not hold classes for students aiming for college, and only held classes for people who are aiming to be real actors. As such, it wasn't easy to get into. Some even said that it was more helpful in an acting career to enter Film than to drama departments of famous universities.

"An interesting kid? What do you mean?" Mr Choi asked.

"It's a kid Lee Junmin had his eyes on, but there's a rumor that Film poached him. Apparently, he's so good at acting that the principal there is willing to support him."

"Really?"

"I heard he's participating in the audition this time as well."

"Dammit, the rich always try to take money from the poor. So they're planning to bribe the production team to get the kid through?"

"Who knows? They might use skill instead."

"Jeez, I really hate my job."

Mister Choi took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth. Mister Lee quickly stopped him from smoking, saying that this was a no smoking area. Of course, Mister Choi didn't plan to light it up. He just did so out of habit.

"Is there a way I can get a number of the original author? I really want a kid I'm supporting to get in."

"The security around him is no joke. I already tried the publishers and the producers, but they will never tell me."

"The security is tight, huh. Tsk, I guess I can only trust luck now."

"You mean your student's skills."

"Yeah right, as if."

Mister Choi snapped the cigarette in his mouth and put it in an empty glass bottle. He had a feeling that he wouldn't be able to get anyone he knew into this movie.

* * * *

It was nearing the end of April. Maru was feeling better. The endless assault of sleepiness was disappearing as time neared May. He was very happy that he could keep a clear mind.

"I'm sleepy as heck," Dojin spoke as he crushed the candy in his mouth. Dowook and Daemyung were already sleeping. It seemed that Maru's drowsiness was transferred over to them.

"Is acting club going well?" Dojin asked as he put his face against the desk.

"It is. Everyone's smart, so they have no problems memorizing the script. Unlike a certain someone, that is."

“Now that makes me feel unpleasant. Why do you say that while looking at me? I wasn’t that bad, you know?”

“Sure you were.”

The acting club was going quite smoothly. Jiyeon, who was a source of his worries, seemed to have cleared up her troubles and stuttered less these days. He recently found out that her father, who was working overseas in Japan, had returned recently. She solved the misunderstanding she had with her mother, and her father was there to add to her stability so there shouldn’t be any further problems.

Oh, there was one new problem, though, this ‘problem’ was a rather peculiar one, since the person responsible for the problem was oblivious to it. It was rather fun to watch over him.

Maru smiled while looking at Daemyung, who was sleeping like a small, hibernating bear. A good man will always attract a good woman. It seemed that Jiyeon had taken a liking to Daemyung, who listened to her story even after the consultation, and her eyes when she looked at Daemyung was not like when she looked at anyone else. Unfortunately, Daemyung hadn’t noticed yet, and Jiyeon was also giving hinting glances at him without taking action as she didn’t have the courage. It was fun to watch over teen romance like this. Maru decided to wait for the romance between the two to ripen as he made a dad smile.

Dowook also seemed to have noticed Jiyeon’s feelings, but he wasn’t someone who would interfere with others’ matters, so he would probably stay quiet.

‘Today’s the day the first years get to put emotions into the recital.’

Suyeon seemed to have created a proper curriculum as she took things step by step. She should lead the others well until the national teenage acting competition in the summer.

“Oh yeah. Maru, didn’t you say you were going to an audition?”

“It’s tomorrow. Also, it’s an interview, not an audition.”

He applied for the audition a while ago, and he received a message asking him to attend an interview two days ago. He was worried that his profile might get dropped before the interview, but fortunately, he passed.

“Wow, you’re going to debut now then?”

“I didn’t even take the audition. I don’t know whether I’m going to pass or not either.”

“Why do you sound so unconfident?”

“Because I am actually not confident at all.”

“Really?”

“This isn’t something I’ve done before, so what makes you think I’m confident about it? I’m just going to do what I learned to do.”

He learned about auditions from Geunsoo starting a while ago. As Geunsoo had experience filming an independent movie, Maru thought that he would be able to get a lot of information from him, and as he had expected, he helped out a lot. He also received some tips from Suyeon as well.

“You’ll do fine.”

“Why is endless confidence coming from you, not me?”

Maru smiled as he rested his head on his hand behind his head. JA building in Nonhyeon-dong, Gangnam. It was pretty obvious who the building belonged to from the name. He made a visit when he made the application, but it was a super tall building. There were at least dozens of people making an application on that day alone. Moreover, this audition did not reveal how many people they were planning to cast. Since there was a lack of information, it gave rise to uneasiness. Just as he thought about the audition tomorrow, his phone started ringing.

[Are you free today?] It was her.

[Anytime.]

[Isn’t there a problem if a guy has free time when he’s about to do an interview?]

[Because it’s you.]

There was no reply for a while. Maru could imagine her face which should be a mix of being creeped out and a smile. He soon got a message. However, it wasn’t from her.

[I hope this is the first piece I get to do with you.]

The message was from Junmin. The rather abstract words made him nervous.

Not long after that, another message arrived.

[Don’t feel too much pressure.]

It was Moonjoong.

‘Elder, you’re giving me more pressure instead,’ Maru thought.

[Good luck.]

That was from Gwak Joon. It was as though they conspired together. Perhaps the three were in the same place. Though, Maru did feel thankful that someone was thinking about him. At the same time, he became a little greedy. He wanted to get the role of the delinquent, but even if it weren't for that, he wanted to participate in this movie in some form or the other.

[I’ll wait for you in front of your school after school ends.]

This time, the message came from her. Maru smiled faintly as he texted back.

[Okay.]

Chapter 220

“I’ll be off, then,” Maru told his classmates as he left the classroom.

He put his bag on before climbing down the stairs. Drifting past the crowd of students after school was over, he left the front gates and walked straight towards the pedestrian overpass right in front of the school. His girlfriend told him that she'd be waiting in the fruit juice store on the other side of the overpass. He crossed the overpass and arrived in front of the store. He entered the store as he watched her, who was sitting by the window.

"You're early," Maru spoke as he sat down.

He thought she'd be wearing her school uniform, but she was wearing casual clothes.

"Today's our school's founding day. Didn't I tell you that before?"

"Wouldn't I remember if you told me?"

"You could have forgotten."

"Unfortunately, I take pride in my memory. If you told me, I would never have forgotten."

"Fine, fine, you're awesome, I get it."

"Did you just realize how great your boyfriend is?"

"I should just...," She raised her fist as she said those words.

"Want to drink something?" Maru asked as he put his bag on the chair next to hers.

She replied 'strawberry juice' in a small voice. Maru soon went to the counter to order the drinks before returning to his seat.

"So your interview is tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"You should be nervous."

"I'm fine with the interview, but I'm pressured by everyone who has expectations of me."

"Should I not have come today?" She asked, with all of her smile gone. Maru just shrugged.

"The ring I gave you, you put it on."

Her finger had the rabbit-shaped ring he gifted her last year. She covered her ring with her hand, but he had already seen everything.

"It suits you."

".....It doesn't look childish?"

"It looks cute on you."

"I, is that so?"

She removed the hand that covered her ring. Maru went to the counter to get the drinks. The weather was getting warm. The droplets condensed on the outside of the glass felt good to touch.

“So you’re here to cheer me on?”

“No, not really, “ she spoke as she made a happy expression after drinking a sip. A smile of satisfaction blossomed on her face.

Maru felt his daily fatigue disappear just from looking at her. Feeling Maru’s gaze, she frowned a little.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Why?”

“It’s strange.”

“What’s so strange about me looking at my girlfriend?”

“Urgh.”

She flicked her finger to hit Maru’s forehead. Maru felt that he would be nagged at if he teased her anymore, so he decided to stop there. He looked away and drank the strawberry juice in front of him. The combination of carbonation and the strawberry taste was rather nice. He thought that he should frequent this place in the future.

“Let’s leave once you’re done,” Maru heard these words just as he thought that he found a nice place.

She put her handbag on her legs and was getting ready to get up.

“You finished it already?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

The 400ml glass was definitely almost full when it first came out and she drank all of it in just one gulp. This was very unusual of her since she usually spent an hour chatting over a glass of drink.

“I still have this much left,” Maru said as he showed her his glass that was still almost full.

“Then finish it quickly,” she frowned as she spoke.

“Why are you in such a rush today?”

“Don’t talk back to me and finish it already.”

She poured half of his glass into hers and gulped it down again in one go. Maru wanted to ask why she was doing that, but he had no choice but to drink down his own portion once he saw her pressing eyes. As soon as he finished his glass, she stood up.

“Let’s go.”

“Go where?”

“Follow me.”

As soon as Maru grabbed his bag, he felt her hand pulling on his clothes. Maru looked at her confusedly since she seemed like she was being chased by something.

“Did something happen?”

“N, no.”

‘Oh?’ She even started stuttering now. A panicked expression could clearly be seen on her face, yet her footsteps did not stop. They crossed the street and entered high street. This was where high school students from around the area all gathered around. Maru quickly followed her as she drifted through the crowd wearing school uniforms.

“Where are we going?”

“We’ll be there soon.”

Not telling their destination, she kept walking. Maru subconsciously smiled since she was like a girl overjoyed with knowing a secret. Going past the food stalls, she arrived at a street with shops and looked around before walking towards one of the stores gleefully. She went through the automatic door. Maru raised his head to look at the name of the store. This store was one that sold casual-style suits.

‘Suits?’ Maru wondered.

Heading inside, she hesitated a moment before being guided by one of the store attendants to one corner. Maru had a look at the array of suits on display. A strange smile appeared on his face since it reminded him of when he first entered his company in his previous life. The nervousness, fear and excitement from back then appeared in one corner of his heart.

“What are you doing?” She asked as she approached from behind.

“Can I ask you to fit me with a suit if I get employed by a good company in the future?”

“What are you talking about? That’s random.”

She pulled on Maru’s ears. Maru turned around where he saw a display of neckties.

“Come here.”

Standing in front of a full-body mirror, Maru stared at the necktie that she tried on him.

“Does this color suit you?” She asked herself as she put the navy-colored tie against his chest.

She soon put the tie back on display, clearly dissatisfied. She had a look at the other ties while tilting her head. Maru saw that the lady attendant from before was grinning while covering her mouth. He would have grinned as well. He was overjoyed that she was picking out a tie for him and it wasn’t so bad to wait for her decision, but he decided to interrupt her this time.

“You’re giving me a tie as a present?”

“Yeah. I’m always on the receiving end. Since you have an interview tomorrow, I thought a tie should be good. I mean, a suit and a pair of shoes are too expensive.”

“But I’m not wearing a suit for the interview,” His words made her stare back at him in a questioning light. Though even that seemed adorable to him.

"I should be wearing clothes that fit my role. If I'm acting as a company employee, then I would be wearing a suit, but the role I want is that of a delinquent."

"Really?"

The tie in her hand rolled down towards the floor helplessly. The drooping necktie seemed to represent her current feelings.

"But....."

Maru quickly grabbed one of the ties that she had tried on him before.

"I'll be needing one some day, so I guess it won't be so bad to receive one from you now. No, in fact, it'd be better to get one from you now. I'll treat it as a good luck charm."

The tie in Maru's hand was a dark blue one with a striped pattern. It was a common choice for a tie. She had a look at the tie that she chose and the one that Maru chose before nodding her head.

"That suits you. Though, it's a little bland."

"Bland neckties are the best kind."

Maru stood in front of the mirror with the tie in hand. The sensation of silk he hadn't touched in a long time, as well as the slippery feeling of the tie made him think that this was the reason why everyone studied hard since young.

He was about to put the tie on, when he saw her figure who was staring at him through the mirror.

"Put it on for me," Said Maru as he turned around.

He leaned forward towards her with a big grin on his face. She flinched back.

"Why should I!"

"Because you're buying it for me. You should at least do this much."

"....."

"Please, you know I followed you obediently today."

If she was capable of rational thought, she would have noticed that something was wrong with that reasoning, but Maru did not give her the chance to. Moreover, from the fact that she wasn't so rejecting towards him made him feel that she didn't hate it that much. Perhaps she just felt embarrassed. She slowly turned around to check the position of the store attendant before approaching him.

"How do I do it?"

"As you wish."

Her thin hands grabbed the two ends of the tie. At first, she was embarrassed, but she soon gained focus. She tried many different knots to tie the tie. Maru waited patiently as he watched the adorable agony on her face.

Perhaps about three minutes passed.

“....That’s not the right way, right?” She said as she put her hands off the tie.

Maru said ‘let’s see’ before looking at the mirror. The tie was definitely on. It was just that the shape was seriously wrong.

“You did well for your first time. You’re good with your hands.”

Maru untied the weird knot. Then he slowly tied it back properly. He got to the point where he just had to pull the smaller part down.

“Here, grab this and pull it down gently.”

She carefully pulled on the tie. The faintly restrictive feeling on Maru’s neck made him realize again that it symbolized one’s resolve towards the world. With the tie on, one had to avoid the bullet hell that was criticism and the bomb that was incompetency to get a salary to feed the family.

“Why are you so good at it?” She asked, pouting.

“You’ll be able to do it once you’re my age.”

“You always talk about your age when I ask things like that.”

Hmph - she snorted and took the tie off him before approaching the sales clerk. Maru scanned the suits in the store before walking towards the counter.

“It’s 50,000 won.”

“50,000 won?”

“Yes.”

“Ah... Okay.”

With an awkward smile, she took out her wallet. It seemed that it was above her estimation. Maru hesitated on whether he should take his wallet out instead, but he decided to endure his impulse today. She was a proud girl. It would be better for him to stay still unless she asked him for help.

Fortunately, it wasn’t that she wasn’t lacking money. However, her wallet was completely empty after spending 50,000 won.

‘She’s pushing herself.’

The clerk put the tie in a paper bag. She received the bag before handing it to Maru.

“Use it well.”

“I’ll use it my entire life, so you don’t worry about that.”

“Then let’s go separate ways since we got our things done. You’re going to Seoul early tomorrow, aren’t you?”

Maru followed her out of the store. As the sun was starting to set, the sky was turning purple. The street lights started switching on one by one, and the store signs started lighting up. Posts indicating last batch discounts for the season could be seen everywhere.

She walked down the street with her hands behind her back. Oftentimes, she stopped when she found something to her liking, but she never lingered for a long time. Just as the two were about to exit the street though, she stopped in front of one of the stores. Her eyes were fixated on a rather crude wooden stand. To be exact, she seemed to be looking at a pair of shoes on the stand. She took a step forward to get a closer look at the pair of shoes. Following her gaze, Maru saw a pair of flat shoes. It was a pair of peach-colored shoes with a droplet-sized bead at the tip. The price was 30,000 won.

She reached out for her wallet inside her bag, but she flinched before turning around. Maru walked past the store as though nothing happened, but he clearly committed those shoes to memory.

“I can get the bus here.”

The bus came and she waved her hand as she got onboard. After confirming that the bus left, leaving a large amount of smoke behind, Maru put his hands inside his pockets and turned around to walk to the store from before.

“Hello?”

Maru picked up the pair of flat shoes that she had her eyes on earlier. The owner rushed out after hearing his voice.

“Yes, young one. What would you like?”

“Please pack this up for me.”

“Oooh? Whose gift is it?”

Hearing that question, Maru took out some money from his wallet before replying in a low voice.

“A girl I am going to see for a lifetime.”