

Once Again 31

Chapter 31

“Something you want to ask me?”

Maru looked down at his drink for a second. When was the last time he talked with his dad like this? It was probably the night after introducing the love of his life. That day, he remembered hearing his father say,

[Finally, I get to have a drink with you.]

Father and son. They lived for over twenty years as family, but their relationship was still strangely awkward. Saying ‘dad’ each time made Maru feel embarrassed for some reason at the time. Only after getting a daughter himself did Maru start regretting such things. He regretted not having talked to his dad more. The man must’ve felt sad over the coldness of his own son. And now... Maru watched as his father took a swig accompanied by a happy expression on his face.

“What was your dream, dad?”

“Dream? Me?”

“Yes.”

“...You really did change a bit after becoming a high schooler, didn’t you. And here I thought your mother was exaggerating.”

Dad smiled.

“My dream, huh. I wanted to be a boxer when I was your age. I was pretty good back in high school, actually.”

“You wanted to go pro.”

“Pretty much.”

Maru knew that his dad had gone to amateur competitions several times, but not the fact that his father wanted to go pro. Come to think of it, he never heard what dad’s past was like either. He never asked, after all. He was pretty uncaring, wasn’t he. He knew so little about his own parents.

“Right. But my family didn’t have a lot of money. My dad’s household went bankrupt when I was still in school. That’s when my dad, ah, your grandfather, fell ill as well.”

Dad grabbed the bottle to pour Maru a glass. Maru lifted up his glass with two hands.

“When’d you learn something like this?”

Maru grinned. Another one of his old habits. It kind of came out of nowhere. His dad downed his shot in one gulp.

“My mother jumped into the workforce for the first time in her life, and I couldn’t keep boxing as well. With how well off my family was originally, I could’ve gone to college but I ended up just working right

after high school. My sisters were in the same boat as me. No, it was worse, actually. Women weren't treated so well back then."

"Did you end up getting a job right away?"

"I worked at factories for a bit before going into the mines. That was around 1987, I think."

Maru glanced at his dad's hands. Those hands looked darker than ever to him for some reason.

"Dream... My dream back then was to get my own house. I saved up a bunch of money then. I had met your mother around that time and we got married. I gave up on the mining gig because of your mom. Since your mother was working at a company at the time, I could rest a little bit. I looked for a new job while I rested. In the end, I went into a small factory. Since your mother worked at a trade company, our income wasn't that small. And then you were born."

"She must've had to quit her job."

"Yup. Your mother cried a lot during then. Nowadays she's just a lady who tries to buy things on sale but she was amazing back then. The company knew of her worth, but they couldn't keep a pregnant woman working in their company. The world was really unfair back then."

Dad took another shot angrily.

"And then the IMF came. My factory had to close down. There was no way it could survive, especially when the 8th biggest company in the country had to close down as well. Thankfully, the boss had accumulated an insane amount of dollar bills, so we were able to start anew very easily." (The Asian Financial Crisis)

"That was the time when the dollar bill doubled its value compared to the Korean won, wasn't it? He must've made a lot."

"You remember? This was during your elementary school."

"Sort of. I remember you and mom being really down back then."

That was just an excuse. He learned all of this back in the past.

"I see. Of course you kids would've noticed. There aren't any problems in raising the two of you now though, so don't worry."

Dad smiled wryly.

"Anyway. Dreams, right? Right, dreams. Maru, Dreams are good to have, but it isn't a problem to not have one either. Most people just talk about their dreams despite not actually having one. Even so... I hope you don't live like me, and end up getting a dream of your own."

"What's wrong with living like you? You're doing a great job, dad."

"Oh, you."

Dad drank with an embarrassed look. Maru put away the bottle of soju to the side. They weren't drinking to get drunk, but rather to start opening up between each other. He opened a can of beer instead.

"I had a lot of dreams, but my current one is for you to do well like me. And maybe help out with our retirement in the future as well?"

"You're already thinking of retirement?"

"I'm just saying it now just in case."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of you."

"...That was a joke. No parent would ever want to be a burden on their children. I just hope you live well enough by yourself. I'm preparing very carefully for my retirement, you know. Going to travel the world with your mother."

Dad sounded like an excited child. Very different compared to his usually quite demeanor. Maru poured himself a new glass of beer. It was sweet on his tongue.

"Speaking of which, Maru. What's your dream?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you must have one, don't you?"

"I don't know. I asked because I was curious. I don't know what my dream really is."

"Who else would know your dream other than yourself?"

"Funny, isn't it? I should know my dream."

Maru took another swig, annoyance plastered all over his face as he downed the beer. He chugged the entire thing in one gulp and wiped his mouth. Oops. That was a mistake. He shouldn't have drank so much in front of his dad.

"You're drinking well."

"Hahaha. O-of course. I'm your son, after all."

"Then again, I drank quite a bit myself when I delivered rice wine in your age. It was very tasty, taking a few sips from a bottle as I biked around town."

"You didn't get punished by grandpa?"

"Of course I did."

The two of them talked for a while after that. Maru's dad told him all sorts of stories, almost as if he was saving them up since the day Maru was born. Maru, too, had a lot of questions to ask dad as well. They were connecting with each other after years of excommunication. It was just a short conversation, but Maru took a lot from it.

"We should sleep now. It's late."

“Yes.”

Maru threw away the empty cellophane of snacks and put the alcohol back in the fridge. Dad stepped back into his room with a smile on his face. Maru grabbed onto his door handle as well. Right then, dad peeped his head back into the dark living room.

“Maru.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know if I should be saying this to you, but you look like you can take it so I will.”

Dad paused for a few seconds before continuing.

“I think you should have a dream. Life becomes too boring otherwise. Whatever you decide to do, I hope your dream has something to do with it. But...”

Dad turned to look at Maru. No word bubble popped up. Even so, Maru was able to catch a glimpse of what dad was thinking. The man’s expression and breathing told him everything.

“I hope you know this. To have a dream is a very brave thing to do. And... People who have a dream must be prepared to give it up as well.”

His smile seemed to have a tinge of regret on it. Perhaps he was reminiscing about his boxing aspirations. Did he ever fully give up on that dream?

“Now, go sleep.” “Yes. Good night.”

Those who had a dream must be ready to give it up. Maru thought over the sentence over and over again.

* * *

“You brought the money?”

“Yeah.”

Maru watched his two friends talk to each other. The two of them always got together here to chat during break times.

“What money?” Maru asked.

“The money for the instructor.”

Each of them took out 3 ten thousand won bills. Sixty thousand won total. Maru was confused. He’d never heard of this.

“When did you guys decide on this?”

“Saturday.”

“Aha.”

“You don’t have to pay. It’s just an us thing.”

“Really?”

Good thing he doesn't have to spend any money.

“But...” Daemyung butted in, “why do the teachers talk so formally with each other? And this money, if the advisor told instructor Miso about it, I'm sure she would understand.”

Dojin clicked his tongue.

“These people have their own pride, you know. Think about it, appearing weak to your own student from years back? Man, I'd go crazy if I had to do that. It's no wonder the advisor used his own salary.”

“Is it?”

“It is.”

“So why are they so polite with each other?”

“Maybe they aren't great friends. I mean, he didn't even tell us that she was our senior.”

Dojin sounded pretty confident, but Maru shook his head quietly.

“What, you disagree?”

“It can't be that.”

“Then why would the advisor treat her like that? I thought they didn't even know each other?”

“I can bet that they're like that even in private. Want to go?”

Dojin and Daemyung shook their heads when Maru took out a thousand won.

“The advisor's just letting the instructor save face. What do you think would've happened if he treated her like a kid or a student in front of us?”

“Well...”

Daemyung nodded in understanding.

“You know how the advisor's like. I've noticed that he treats students who graduated a few years back the same way. My guess is that he's trying to treat them like real adults. I think that's really admirable of him. That's probably why he tried to handle the money problem as quietly as possible. He doesn't want any trouble, especially because he knows the instructor so well. You said so as well, didn't you, Dojin? The more you know someone, the more you should treat them with respect.”

“Yeah. The advisor's a really cool guy.”

The two of them agreed.

“So how are you trying to give him the money? I don't think he'd take it.”

“We're planning on giving it to the instructor.”

“Oh, there's, that, huh.”

“But you know what’s funny?”

“What?”

“The advisor buys us dinner every time. Every day. She doesn’t like hiding things much, so she told us that she gets paid 40000 won an hour.”

Maru couldn’t help but laugh in surprise. The woman really didn’t hide anything. Then again, that explained their conversation on the rooftop.

But hold on.

If she’s working as much as now...

“But she comes every weekday. Doesn’t she also stay for the entire day on weekends?”

“Yeah. It’d be ridiculous if she were to get paid for all of that. So we asked.”

“You asked exactly how much she gets paid?”

“Yeah.”

“Hah.”

Dojin was quite something as well, to have the balls to ask a question like that.

“She was supposed to be paid just 800 thousand won in total, with her coming only on the weekends. But she comes every day. She probably spent more than half of that on our food already, too.”

Maru recalled seeing Miso give out cash to buy the students dinner.

“She’s losing money doing this.”

“Right?”

“Work hard, you guys.”

“That’s the plan.”

The two of them grinned.

* * *

Time passes akin the mound of sand draining from your hand. Before you’ve realized, it’s all slipped away. The club was doing well. Everything from prop making to practice. Maru spent most of his time there making the props.

“Where the hell did you find this?”

“Just looked around a bit.”

There was a huge pile of wood all over the auditorium. They didn’t look so good after years of not being used, but they look a lot better with paint over them.

Maru helped out by nailing boards together. He couldn't bear watching the kids figure out how to nail things on the board by themselves. It looked too dangerous.

"Dang, Maru."

"Wow, our manager really can do everything."

Of course he could. He's worked this kind of job for more than just a few years. Maru put a few more wooden planks for support at the bottom and erected their store. It was built very roughly with planks, but it still weighed quite a bit. The other students came over to put it up with him.

"Ohh."

"This'll look pretty good with more decor."

Maru smiled as he looked at the prop. At least he managed to contribute to the club one way or the other. That made him feel a bit better. Not much has changed after the day he talked with his dad. He still thought about his dreams every once in a while, but he had no idea what his dream was. Was there anything he really wanted to do in his 45 years of life? What were the things he had to give up on because he was too busy trying to stay alive? That was the only thing on Maru's mind during last week.

His original question of 'how am I going to live?' had morphed into 'what kind of dreams do I want?'

Dream. What did Maru want to dream about?

Chapter 32

"I told you, I'm fine."

"Please take it."

"Come on, teach."

Miso sighed as Taesik stuffed the envelope in her coat pocket.

"I can earn enough money on my own."

"I know you earn enough money, instructor Yang. But that's a separate matter."

"It was so much better when I was just a student, things are so awkward now."

Taesik smiled. Miso put the envelope in her pants pocket, thinking that she really couldn't beat this teacher.

"I know you don't earn this much, teach. It's ok, seriously."

"I live alone, so it's fine. Plus, I saw everything. You spend a ton of money feeding the kids."

"I told you not to worry about it. You know it's going to cost me much, much more if you were paying me properly, right?"

"That's why I'm very thankful. I was feeling very sorry when I first called you. I thought I was taking your time, especially since I knew there were other clubs that wanted you. Ah, speaking of which, I saw that college play of yours last time. The one you produced. It was very good."

“Oh, you did? You should’ve told me. Don’t tell me you bought the ticket?”

“Of course I did. The play deserved a proper payment.”

“Ugh, when are you ever going to make use of your student?”

Miso scratched her head. She was reminded of high school. Back when Taesik and the club members were all new to the school. Many things went badly for them, which made school difficult, but thanks to that one crazy guy, they managed to pull off their play nicely.

What would things have been like if she didn’t join the club then? Her life would definitely be a lot more boring compared to now.

“Do any other former club members come by every once in a while?”

“Of course. They’re all doing very well. I’m proud.”

“Of course they would be. They’re your students. But by the way, teach?”

“Yes?”

“Can’t you do something about that style of yours? Especially the way you talk.”

“Is there something wrong with it?”

“You sound so old talking like that. You’re not even 40, but you sound like a grandpa.”

“38 might as well be 40 at this point.”

“Ugh... at this rate you’re never going to get married.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

Taesik seemed more composed than ever. Miso took a look at the man’s clothing. He was wearing a very old jacket with stained jeans. Under the jacket she could see a knit sweater that grandpas often wore to hikes.

“Do you even have a girlfriend?”

“Hum, hum.”

“I knew it. You’re going to regret it, you know?”

“I’ve thought this 13 years ago as well, but you’re very difficult to deal with, instructor Yang.”

“Why?”

“You don’t hesitate to hurt people. Well, enough about me. You should keep teaching the kids. I haven’t seen kids this motivated in a while. The props are incredibly well made as well.”

“The props were done by Maru.”

“Maru?”

“Yeah. Speaking of him, he’s kind of weird. He definitely doesn’t act his age.”

“He is a lot more thoughtful than others. Very polite as well. Well, not polite. He’s...”

“Considerate. He makes me feel like I’m drinking with a person that’s hard to deal with. He always seems to be troubled about something, and he always looks like he’s experienced everything before.”

“He’s just a lot more thoughtful than most students.”

“He’s way too thoughtful. You should talk with him sometime. It really feels like there’s an old man hiding inside of the kid.”

“That’s a little...”

“That’s exactly what it is.”

Miso took out her phone. The school bell rang, signaling an end to the school day. It was time to meet the kids again.

“I’ll get going then.”

“Sure. Good luck.”

“Don’t worry. Also, you really have to change out of those clothes. Got it?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t just think about it, just do it!!”

“Fine, fine. Just get going.”

Taesik waved her away. Miso shook her head. A freshman acting like a 50 year old, and a 30 year old was acting like a 60 year old. What the hell was this?

‘Ugh, I’ll just buy him something myself in the future.’

Looking at the man just made her feel frustrated.

‘He looks really cool if he just pays attention to himself.’

Taesik was the star of the school just 13 years ago. His looks, accompanied with his smile and speech... He was every high school girl’s crush. Miso turned back once again. She could see Taesik smiling at her, in that incredibly old jacket of his.

“Sigh.”

The years really haven’t been kind to the poor man.

* * *

Miso looked a lot worse than usual today. Maru tried to slip out of the auditorium when she wasn’t paying attention, lest he were to incur her wrath as well.

“Han Maru!”

Oh boy, it was too late. What was she going to say this time?

“Wait right there. You guys stay here practicing your lines. You better not make a mistake by the time I come back, got it?”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Good.”

Miso walked over to the auditorium entrance where Maru was standing. She seemed to have made up her mind about something, which meant nothing but trouble to him.

“Um, what...”

“Follow me.”

“What?”

Miso grabbed his arm. She seemed to be planning on dragging him elsewhere. Maru had no intention of allowing that though. He didn’t like getting pulled away without a reason like this.

“Follow me.”

“Please tell me where we’re going.”

“Aha, so you’re planning on resisting, huh? You think I’m weak because I’m a girl? Just you watch, I...”

Miso pulled at his sleeves. She was strong for sure. Especially for a woman. But Maru didn’t even budge. He could easily take something like this. His body was almost abnormally strong compared to his past self. It was probably another one of the gifts given to him in starting his life again.

“Ughhh.”

Miso pulled harder.

“Um, you could just tell me...”

“Shut it. This has to do with my pride.”

Pride? Here?

Miso tugged him with all of her strength. She was getting weirdly competitive with this. Maru looked back. He could hear voices behind him. The club members were all looking at them with concerned expressions.

“Look away!”

Miso shouted. The club members instantly looked somewhere else. Kind of like meerkats. Maru stepped forward, shaking his head. This was making him embarrassed now.

“Don’t you dare move. I’m going to make you move by force.”

“You win, instructor.”

“Hey!”

“Let’s go.”

Maru stepped down, leaving Miso behind him. He could hear her huffing loudly, but decided to ignore it. He's dealt with a lot of actors as a road manager in the past. One thing he's learned about actors during that time... was that many actors had a very innocent side to them.

Innocence was a really good way of putting it. A lot of times, they were more childish. Acting is an art form where a person had to throw their all into a play. Shame has no experience in acting. That's why a lot of actors have strange personalities. Strange enough for people to misunderstand that these actors were rude. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It just meant that those actors are successful. Successful and skilled enough to make money despite their rudeness. Most unsuccessful actors acted as humble as they could. But actors with stable careers typically acted with pride.

Speaking of which, he recalled that Miso was a pretty famous instructor as well. She wasn't even over 30 yet, meaning she had a very bright future ahead of her. That is...

She was talented, so she didn't need to act humble at all, which led to the development of a very stubborn worldview. You can't just keep losing to people like her. They would keep sticking to you otherwise. The best tactic to take, then, was to either keep ignoring them or to just suck up to them. Out of those two, Maru decided to just ignore her. The effect was pretty immediate.

"....."

Miso came down the stairs with an annoyed look. She took a deep breath before walking over to the parking lot to Maru's observation.

"Come on, get over here. I'm an adult you know. Follow me for once."

"Where are we going?"

"I want to show you something."

"What?"

"Hyehwa station."

"The place with all the college theaters?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?"

Miso opened the door of her car.

"Get in!"

* * *

Miso glanced quickly over at Maru. The boy was turning another page of his book. To think a kid would maintain his pace so well like this... It was almost frightening.

"What are you reading?"

“It’s an autobiography by an actor. It’s pretty fun.”

The boy didn’t even look at her as he spoke. He was deeply engrossed in whatever chapter he was on. Miso... honestly was a little bit greedy for Maru. If a normal kid acted like him, she would’ve just ignored him from the start. But...

‘To think he’d be able to read his lines so calmly, especially with that breath...’

One time when Geunseok was running late to the club, Miso let Maru read the other boy’s line during practice. It was a pretty long line, enough for a normal student to lose their breath in the middle of it. She was fully expecting Maru to lose his breath and stutter and everything, but then?

She found Maru reading the line start to finish without missing a single beat. His voice didn’t even shake during the reading. He seemed to be used to reading lines like this. This was the most important part. Imbuing emotions into those lines came later.

Breathing and diction are the two most important things for any actor. In that sense... Maru was a born genius. Miso was confident that the boy would catch the eyes of a judge during any high school competition if he practiced enough.

Thing was, the boy didn’t seem interested. No, that was wrong. The boy was interested. That was why he was here. He was feeling conflicted. About what, Miso wasn’t so sure. It was something clearly complicated though, far more so than anything a normal high schooler would deal with.

That’s why Miso decided to do this today. Leaving such raw talent just wasn’t her style.

“I’m going to drag that thing out of you.”

“Drag the what?”

“You’ll see.”

Miso stepped on the gas with a grin.

Chapter 33

Hyehwa station. It’s been a while. The streets were filled with the gentle breeze of May. He could see people walking around with light clothes. Were they actors or audiences? Maru wasn’t sure. He could see a man walking around with a guitar on his back. The man sat down next to a cafe and started playing like that was his stage right there.

The guitar’s noise didn’t travel very far, especially without an amp. People still flocked around him regardless. The man’s melodic voice had quite the strength to it. Various students, couples, and individuals were flocking around him.

“Want to listen?” Miso asked. Maru nodded.

The man’s music was good enough to pay to listen to. The man was surrounded by a massive crowd in no time. After finishing his first song, he gave the crowd a short bow. This definitely wasn’t his first time. The crowd opened up their wallets as the man opened his case towards them. Maru took out a thousand won, too. One of the kids even gave the man an unopened pack of bread on his hand.

“Thank you.”

The musician took a bite of the bread, giving a curt nod towards the kid. Someone else gave him a drink in response.

“Man, I’m lucky today,” the man laughed. After finishing his food, he started his next song.

He was playing purely using his fingers and voice, unaided by any devices. After singing four more songs, the man stood up from his spot.

“The next performance will be at Maronier park.”

He left with that, bringing a part of the crowd behind him like rats following the pied piper.

“Shall we go?” Miso asked.

“Where?”

“What else would we do here other than to watch plays? Let’s just watch a short one.”

Miso tried to drag Maru away by his arm again. Maru removed his arm from her grip carefully before walking by himself.

“You’ve got quite the personality, huh?”

“I don’t like being dragged around.”

“Even if you were dragged all the way here already?”

“We could go back, then.”

“...Tsk. You talk too well.”

Miso stepped forward first. There was quite a crowd in front of both of them. It was a warm Saturday. It was inevitable that lots of people would come out to play. But as the two of them stepped towards one of the smaller theaters, a voice called out to them.

“You’re here to watch plays, right?”

The voice was from a handsomely-dressed man. Probably a college student. He had a few tickets and pamphlets in his hand.

‘A part-timer, huh,’ Maru noted.

One of the few regular things you would get to see at Hyehwa station. Some of it was done by the youngest member of the troupe, but most of it was done by hired part-timers. Maru knew about them pretty well. Since their pay rate depended directly on their sales, they would often stick to you like leeches.

“This is a play that our theater is host...”

Right when the man said about this much, Miso grabbed the man’s shoulder and pushed him away.

“We’re both in the same line of business. Can we not?”

The man shut his mouth with a frown. He looked like he stepped on feces. He dusted off his clothes and walked away muttering 'freaking unlucky'.

"What? Unlucky?" Miso snarled.

"Just leave. Don't bother my work. Jeez."

The man stepped off after giving Miso a short glare. Miso opened her mouth for a second with an angry expression but stopped herself after a glance at Maru.

"Ugh, so many delinquents around here nowadays," she said instead.

"Don't worry about it. He's just trying to make money."

"Right. Trying to make money. That's why I'm being so understanding. But that doesn't mean... wait, did you come here before?"

"A few times."

Maru answered lazily before turning to look at the man again. He was approaching a few female students with a bright grin on his face. He was beginning to explain with a bunch of gestures, halting the students' movements.

"He's got one, that bastard," Miso said.

Maru took another look at the man and the students. The man was using more forceful words by the second. He could feel the students getting more troubled as well. The man showed them the tickets. He didn't seem to be planning on letting them go unless they bought it. In the end, the students whispered together for a second before reaching for their wallets.

Maru headed over to the group. It wasn't bad for them to get introduced to plays this way, but... He didn't like how the guy was doing it. Threats were a no go.

"Just go buy the love tickets."

"Excuse me?" the students responded.

Maru could feel the man glaring at him.

"Students get to watch at a cheaper price. You should check them out."

"Ah, thank you."

The girls shuffled away towards the way Maru pointed. They didn't stop even when the man shouted 'hey hey, come back, we have better things here' at them.

"Damn it. Had to get a few idiots blocking my way."

The man stood in front of Maru.

"You here to sell tickets as well?"

"Nope."

“Then what are you doing? Why are you blocking my sales? Are you from a different theater? No, there’s no way. You’re just a high schooler. Fuck.”

“Please mind your language. And there’s nothing good about forcing your tickets onto poor students.”

“Force? Me? Hah. You call a nice introduction like that a forceful one? Huh? Huh?!”

The man poked Maru’s shoulders a few times. A word bubble popped out when their eyes met.

[Fucking turd.]

Well, there really was no need to see it.

“I’m sorry for being a little turd. In any case, I would actually like to apologize for interfering with your business.”

Maru bowed. He wasn’t planning on saying this much in the beginning. He was just planning on walking away after getting the girls away. But the more he talked, the more annoyed Maru became. Why was he getting so annoyed over this? This wasn’t the type of thing that should bother him this much.

“Hah, just leave. You’re annoying me.”

“Just don’t be so forceful. What if they never come here again?”

“I get it so leave. Fucking...”

The man raised his fist. Maru wasn’t too surprised. The first thing that came to his mind was ‘I’ll just report him if I get hit’. The classic method of defense against older men. He stepped forward, taunting the man to punch. The man was the one who became more troubled by that. He walked away with an annoyed face, looking for a new place to sell tickets.

“You’re quite a piece of work, did you know that?” Miso said.

Maru had to agree with that one. He really didn’t expect to be doing that. That wasn’t something neither his younger or older self would’ve ever thought about doing. So what was that? What made him so annoyed at the part-timer? He couldn’t really figure out why and thinking about why just made his head hurt more.

‘Did something happen in the future?’

His memories were just getting hazier. Watching them just sink underneath like that in real-time made him feel a little scared sometimes.

‘At least I can remember them at crucial moments.’

“Let’s go.”

“...Sure.”

* * *

The place Miso lead him to was a small theater located on the second floor of a building. The theater’s name was Blue Sky.

“Blue Sky?”

“Seem familiar?”

Miso smiled mysteriously as she stepped in. When Maru followed, he was greeted with a line of people next to the entrance. He could hear a few voices from inside.

“We’ll be accepting those with assigned seats first. I’m sorry for the wait this might cause.”

A lady was guiding the crowd with a smile. She seemed to be in her mid-twenties.

“Let’s wait a bit. We don’t want to bother the audience.”

“Sure.”

Miso was very forceful a lot of the time, but when it came to her work she was more serious than anyone else. Eventually, they were next in line.

“Senior!”

“Hey.”

“It’s been too long.”

“Too long? I was here 2 weeks ago.”

“But I wasn’t here then. Are you here for someone?”

“Nah. I’m here to show this kid a play.”

The woman’s eyes landed on Maru, who responded with a curt nod.

“He looks nice. Who is he?”

“I have no idea.”

The woman made a confused look for a second.

“You got any seats left? We’ll stand in the back if not,” Miso continued.

“We’ll probably have a few available.”

“I’ll wait, then. I want to check if you’ll get any more customers.”

“Ok.”

Maru stepped into the theater with Miso. It was dimly lit with darkened lights. There seemed to be around 70 seats in the entire theater packed into the building. It wasn’t possible to sit comfortably, but that was what made theaters charming.

“Please stop eating once the play begins. We’ll give you plenty of time for pictures after the play as well, so please refrain from that during the actual play. These are rules that are meant for you to enjoy the play to the fullest, so please understand.”

The lady at the line started talking on the stage. The audience started putting away their food immediately.

“We don’t have any spare seats.”

“I can watch standing.”

“Yes, let’s. This can be pretty fun, too.”

Miso seemed strangely excited. She actually felt quite a bit different compared to her usual self when she came to Hyehwa station. More... excited? Kind of in a way that kids were excited. The lights started to dim in the theater, signaling the start of the play. Right then, someone came up to the two of them to talk.

“You’re here.”

“Yep.”

Maru took a look at the man talking with Miso. He couldn’t make out much of the man’s face out of the shadow.

“Alright, I’ll see you later then.”

“Where are you going?”

“The director wants to see me.”

“Ugh. You’re a total star now, aren’t you?”

“Psh, this is nothing. Who’s the kid?”

“Who knows, a future coworker?”

“Hm, is that so?”

Maru squinted. His eyes were starting to adjust to the dark light, but before he could make out the man’s face, he stepped away from sight.

“Sorry you have to work with Miso. She’s a piece of work,” he said before leaving.

Maru couldn’t help but snort a little. Miso opened her mouth to say something, but the play started by then.

“It’s starting.”

“Shut up and just watch.”

“Alright.”

Ding.

The spotlight turned on with a ding of a bell.

Chapter 34

Plays were definitely more unpopular than movies. Movies you could watch anywhere. They were cheaper. Sometimes they were easier to understand as well. Because of this, plays became a pastime that no one particularly cared about.

Some people never even watched a play in their entire lives. There were just too many other things to see, namely movies. But Miso was sure that a single play would be all it takes to make a person enthralled with plays.

‘Plays have their own charm. It’s fun. You can’t deny that.’

Miso glanced at Maru a bit. The boy was thoughtful. Brave. Hard to handle. But also confused. At least, to Miso, he was. She didn’t know what the boy was conflicted about. The boy was pretty studious, as far as she could see. He would finish every task Miso would give him, and he was never late to club meetings. He was fast and efficient, like many adults she’s worked with, in the past.

Right. An adult. Maru was acting like an adult. Almost like he was one his entire life. He interferes with other people’s lives plenty of times, but never crosses a certain line. He never gets mad, and takes care of problems calmly. He has backup plans as well. Just like when he stepped forward to get hit by that student earlier.

Maru... didn’t have any drive. He was at an age where he really didn’t have anything to lose at all. The age where he could do anything he wanted without any big consequences.

That was what made a person’s teenage years so bright. Because they could do as they pleased with little to no consequence. But Miso wasn’t able to see this light from Maru. This wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. People all have their own ways of living their lives, and Maru had clearly found his own. The first thing Miso felt when looking at Maru was ‘balance’. The boy was relaxed enough about life to be able to handle just about anything. Like a boulder that could withstand the strongest of storms.

Of course, she might just have been imagining things. While she thought she was pretty good at judging people, this didn’t mean she trusted herself completely. There was a need to watch the boy further.

Well, at least she knew Maru was a good kid at this point. And that he was quite a character. The only worrying part of it was...

‘His balance.’

Miso couldn’t help but think that this balance of Maru’s would only help him in the long run. Plays required actors to keep changing themselves. To keep adapting to their new characters and plays. It was a challenge. Acting is an art of challenging oneself. The polar opposite of who Maru was. Would the boy have the courage to keep on facing new challenges?

‘I’m overthinking things again.’

Miso shook her head. She was thinking too much, especially when the boy wasn’t even willing to act yet. Right now, all she wanted to do was to make the boy passionate about plays.

‘I know for sure that you like plays.’

“Pft.”

Miso raised her head after hearing the laughter. The actors were putting on a comedic show on the stage with a lottery ticket. Maru was laughing when the play intended for him to laugh.

'He's definitely used to watching plays.'

Miso looked down at the sitting audience. The people were trying their best to hide their laughter, worrying that they might disturb the actors if they got too loud. It was inevitable. Miso acted the same way when she watched her first play. She was at the front rows at the time, a place where she could see and hear everything from the actors. Everything from the beads of sweat perspiring from their heads to their exhausted huffs. She was so sure at the time that the actors could hear her if she talked. That's why she tried her best to stay quiet in her seat. She grit her teeth to stop herself from laughing and pinched her thighs when she wanted to cry.

Her friends were the same. They tried their best to stay quiet in their seats as well, trying not to appear rude to the actors.

'Come to think of it, that crazy bastard was different.'

She thought of a particular person in her head. The boy who burst out laughing at comic scenes, and cried his eyes out at sad ones. Watching him at the time made Miso feel very ashamed. She knew better now though. That the boy made a better audience than anyone else in the theater.

"Hahaha!"

Maru started laughing a little bit more loudly, watching a particular actor on the stage. Miso could tell that the actor was getting visibly more excited by the boy's laughter. Reactions from the audience were like fuel for the actor. And when the audience reacted strongly...

"Now! Let's decide who'll take the money for this ticket!"

The actor would act more with more passion. Miso put aside her thoughts for a second. She didn't want them getting in her way of the play.

* * *

The actors finished their curtain call after their play and were greeted with a round of applause from the audience.

"You may start taking pictures now! Please take many of them and promote us if you could!"

A photo session finally came around after the lights turned on. Some people were taking pictures enthusiastically, while others just left. The girl who had been handling ticketing, in the beginning, was handing out surveys at the exit.

"If you bring this to us after filling this out, we'll give you a discount. You can also fill the survey out online. Everyone counts, so please fill it out!"

Only about half of the audience took the survey sheet. Half of those threw away the survey sheet straight into the trash can. The girl took back the uncrumpled survey sheets with a smile.

"Ten people took it this time. It's a new record!"

Ten out of seventy. It wasn't that many at all, but it was clearly enough to make the girl excited.

"How was it?" Miso asked.

"It was fun. It's been a while since I last saw one."

"A while?"

"Yes. About twenty..."

Maru coughed after realizing his mistake.

"Two years. I haven't seen one in over two years."

"Didn't you say twenty?"

"No way, you must've misheard me."

"Alright, fine."

The theater was completely empty by then. Miso walked up to the front of the theater to one of the seats. Maru sat down with her. After a moment of waiting, the actors approached them.

"Senior, you're here? Especially now?"

It was the actor who played the father role. The other actors seemed equally excited to see her. Well, all but one, actually.

"W-welcome!"

One of the male actors was clearly very nervous. Miso smiled at him, saying 'it's about time we got a little closer, isn't it?'

"You guys all seem to be doing well. It was fun."

"Well, you taught us, after all. But really, why are you here? Did you come to buy us food?"

"I'd have come later if it was for food. It's actually..."

Miso stopped talking to stare at Maru.

"What is it?"

"Do you want to try going up?"

"Up where?"

"The stage, obviously."

Miso pointed at the stage that the actors were on just a moment ago. The actors nodded collectively before stepping aside for Maru.

"She has her eyes on you, huh?"

"Poor kid."

“Good luck.”

This must’ve happened a few times in the past. Maru turned to look at the actors. They were taking their seats in the audience. Then... The actor was?

“Go up.”

Miso kept motioning for him to go up. How unlucky. Maru hesitated for a second, but climbed on stage anyway. There was no real reason for him to refuse her.

The stage looked a lot larger once he was on it. The audience seats looked a lot larger as well.

“How is it?” Miso asked.

“It’s bigger than I thought.”

“Right? It looked a lot smaller down there, right?”

“Yes.”

Miso nodded proudly.

“Keeping the stage occupied is our job. If that stage looks empty to the audience, it means that the actors aren’t doing a good job.”

“I see.”

Maru could see it. He’s never gotten the sense that the stage was empty during the play. In a way, Miso was praising her juniors for their skill.

“Well then,” she started.

Miso threw Maru a script, which he received with both hands.

“Lights, please.”

One of the actors stepped into the lighting room. The theater started turning dark, and a spotlight turned on where he was standing.

“Want to try reading?” Miso asked.

“Here?”

“Yup.”

Maru stared at the lines for a second before asking a question.

“Why?”

“...Can’t you just do the thing?”

“I need a reason to do it.”

“But you always did it back at school.”

“That’s because it helps with practice for the other students.”

He was thankful that she took him out to watch a play. He hadn’t laughed like that in a while. But he didn’t see why he had to read for her on the stage though. His only observation was Miso’s strange insistence for this.

“You really don’t like to lose, do you? Damn high schoolers.”

Miso turned to her juniors with agitation. But...

“Good job!”

“Yeah, show her!”

“Nice!”

They must’ve suffered quite a lot from Miso. They only shut their mouths when Miso cursed ‘you god damn idiots’ under her breath.

“This is an extension of club activities as well.”

“I’m a stage manager.”

“Your job is to convey your emotions about this to your other members. Is that enough?”

No, it really isn’t enough. Maru just opened the script regardless, unwilling to extend the argument any further. He’d rather go back to school, so he took a deep breath before reading the first line.

“It was his fault.”

The reading began.

Chapter 35

Maru zoomed across his lines as soon as he began. His eyes were fixed on the piece of paper in front of him. He spoke slowly, as if he was reading for a bunch of kids. He had pretty good enunciation as well. A bit quiet, though. But that could be fixed with time.

“How is it?” Miso looked back.

“What?” one of the actors asked, confusion etched blatantly in their voice.

“Just how did you feel about the boy?”

“Well, he was alright. Kind of good at speaking.”

“You?”

“He’s alright. Not much else to it, though.”

The others all voiced the same way when Miso looked at them. There was nothing special about him.

“Maru.”

“Yes?” Maru responded with unmasked annoyance.

“Can you stop looking at the script for a bit? Face us as you read.”

“Really, what’s the reason for doing this?”

“Just do it, please. I’ll buy you food.”

“What if I don’t want food?”

“Are you testing me?”

“...Fine, I’ll do it.”

Maru raised his head towards the audience. Miso watched. There was a massive difference between looking at the script and looking at the audience. It creates a lot of pressure for the actor to make eye contact. As soon as the actor’s attention was turned to the audience seats, countless little bits of information would make their way into the actor’s mind. This was an actor’s most likely reason for making a mistake.

So then... what about Maru? Would the boy be able to read calmly through all of this? Maru’s lips parted after a few seconds. He had his script lowered, and his eyes were right on Miso’s.

Miso laughed. The boy’s only managed to become calmer after looking at the audience. He was looking at the audience pretty evenly, as well. She didn’t ask for all of this, which was what made his performance so interesting.

The boy started reading. He looked over each member of the audience one by one, as if he was telling all of them a story. As she thought, he was very talented.

“Do you really think a boy who’s never been trained can talk like that?” she whispered to her juniors.

“Wait, this is his first time?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, then that changes everything. I thought he was trained already. That’s why I said there wasn’t anything special.”

“Me too.”

“Same.”

These actors were pros in their own right. It was no wonder that Maru looked like nothing special when he took the stage. But after learning that this was his first time? Maru’s demeanor on the stage deserved nothing but praise.

“So he’s going to be the main spectacle for this year’s competition?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“He’s just a stage manager?”

“Just a stage manager?”

“Yeah.”

“So why are you making him do this, then? He doesn’t look like he wants to do this.”

“That’s the thing. He looks like he kind of wants to do it. I can tell from being around him for a while.”

Miso gave Maru another glance as she spoke. The boy was hard to understand, but she did figure out one thing about him. If someone just directed him somewhere, he’d never stop moving forward.

“I felt greedy. You know I like to make kids like him do acting.”

“Yes. That’s your weird hobby. You ended up turning quite a few kids into the ghosts of Hye-hwa. After all, you made me into one as well, didn’t you?”

“So? You regretting it?”

The younger actor slowly shook his head.

“I’d rather live here as a ghost than go into society as a dead soul.”

“That’s right, that’s why I brought you here. People like you need to act. Or else you’d just be living an absolutely pointless life.”

“The way you talk is just…”

“What? If you don’t like it, you can be my senior.”

“I’m good. That sounds even more exhausting. Doesn’t that sound like a horrible life, guys?”

The others nodded vigorously, earning them another glare from Miso.

“Good god, look at all of you. You really don’t know your place, do you?”

“Just means we’ve grown.”

Miso didn’t hate their response at all. In fact, she kind of liked it. There was no reason for juniors to remain juniors. They had every right to surpass their seniors and crush their competition. Miso recalled something she told her juniors in the past.

[You need pride if you become talented. That’s how you make the seniors fear for their positions, and make them improve. That’s why you should study hard and try to chase me out of this theater. That’s the best gift that you can give me as my junior.]

There was no place in this theater for her any more. The audiences of Blue Sky no longer came to see her, but her juniors.

“By the way, senior, I heard you were nearing a full box of eggs soon. Is that true?” (30 eggs per box in Korea, so cracking a joke about age)

“You want to die?”

“Come on, it was just a joke.”

The juniors laughed. Miso recanted her words. These guys weren't worthy of surpassing her just yet. Right then, Maru finished his reading. He never stopped, never stuttered, or never went out of breath. From start to finish, he read the entire script, completely calm.

Miso started wondering.

Just what would the boy look like when he started acting?

* * *

Miso walked over to her car without another word after the reading session. Maru followed, relieved he was finally getting to go back to school.

"Work hard, alright?"

The actors unanimously gave him words of encouragement as he left. It wasn't a bad experience to try reading a script from a stage. That feeling of attention he received... it was kind of riveting. He didn't show it though. He didn't want Miso to know of his enjoyment.

"I hope you do acting," Miso mentioned as she grasped the wheel of her car.

She was just going straight at it. Maru wasn't adept at handling people who were so direct like this.

"So suddenly..."

"Suddenly my ass. I've been hinting at this since we talked on the rooftop. You keep coming to the club. You clearly enjoy the activities we do there. You like watching the other club members as well."

"That's true."

"So why don't you participate? It's just moving one step forward into the club."

"The problem is the size of that one step."

"What do you mean?"

"The amount of time and work you need to put in."

"....."

Maru thought for a second. The woman in front of him had unintentionally jumped into the world of acting despite being unaware, and ended up becoming quite successful. Just looking at her car was proof enough of how much she was earning. Perhaps she was living the life that Maru dreamt of living.

Living to chase their dreams with no inhibitions. Perhaps it would be wise for him to listen to her story? She was younger than him in age, sure, but that didn't determine the value of her life story at all.

"Instructor."

"What?"

"Have you ever regretted being an actor?"

"Regret?"

“Yes.”

Miso stopped the car for a second. She looked out of the window as she tapped at the handle. Perhaps she was looking back into a particular moment in the past.

“Of course I did. Too many times. I wanted to go into the school of acting, but my family couldn’t afford it. No money for academies either. So I came here. To Hyehwa, where I thought I could make it big. I won in the nationals after all. I thought that degrees or education didn’t really matter squat.”

Miso pulled back her blonde hair.

“So I just visited the first theater I saw. And got rejected right away. They didn’t even consider interviewing me. So I tried going to a really poor theater. I thought they’d take me as an actor. They told me that they’d only take me if I started working as a janitor. So I asked if I could at least get on a play. Do you know what they told me?”

“What?”

“They told me to give them a reason to hire me, especially when there were other kids more talented than me all over the place. That shut me right up.”

Miso smiled bitterly.

“You’ve heard of the term, right? The ghosts of Hyehwa station?”

Maru nodded. He knew the term very well. The actors who couldn’t give up on acting, left only to wander the station in search of success. They weren’t able to leave the station because of their passion. They were ghosts.

“It sounds stupid. To be called an actor. The problem is, these ‘ghosts’ are actually all very fine people. There are many, many theaters here. But there are far more actors than that. The competition is fierce. Hundreds of auditions take place for every play at a relatively popular theater. There’s no way that even a small theater would take in a high school graduate as an actor.”

As it turned out, this woman’s life wasn’t as rosy and bright as Maru had first imagined. High school acting, in the end, was just a high school pastime. Nothing compared to the world of pros.

“So? If you couldn’t attend an academy or a school, what did you do?”

He was curious. What would a person do in a situation like this?

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“By that point, my dream was to become an actor. I couldn’t live without it. But reality was ass. My dad ran away, my mom was sick, the loan sharks kept coming for me. So... I gave up.”

“You gave up?”

What? What did she mean? She was clearly living her best life right here. She gave up on her dream?

“Of course I did. I gave up, and got into a boxing match with reality. I might’ve given up on my dream, but I never stopped thinking about it. I started working in a factory for a year. It’s worked out somewhat. I used that money to shoot a monodrama.”

Miso looked right at Maru.

“So that I could keep chasing that damned dream.”

And... she grinned.

Chapter 36

To chase that damned dream, huh. The sentence hit Maru pretty hard. Especially because he knew Miso eventually managed to realize her dream. You can only realize your dream if you challenge yourself. Maru felt that Miso would say the same thing even if she didn’t become as successful as she was now.

Just wait a bit. I’ll get better for sure next time.

She was a strong woman. And it was because of her strength that she was able to live so freely. She didn’t act annoying, or said ridiculous things for the sake of being annoying. She was always confident that what she said was right. Even so...

“You’re pretty cool.”

“Right? I think I’m cool too. That’s why you should...”

“I don’t know, though. Plays are fun. They’re interesting. I hid it, but reading on the stage was actually very fun as well. I learned that getting people’s attention wasn’t such a bad thing.”

“Then what? Just do it.”

“Just do it. You’re right. I should just do it. But I don’t have the courage. I’m not crazy for acting. Even now, keeping it as a hobby sounds like the ideal thing to do.”

“Hey, you don’t even know that. You didn’t even really try acting. You probably don’t know because you’re so young... Actually, I take that back. You act too old for that to apply. Anyway, there’s something you’re not understanding here. No courage? I think you mean you’re afraid, right?”

“I suppose so.”

Miso nodded in understanding.

“Yes. You might not have that courage. But you’re only feeling that because you haven’t experienced it. Fear stems from the unknown. Of course you’d feel afraid of something you haven’t tried. But you know that more often than not, it’s not very scary once you actually try it out. Right?”

Fear stems from the unknown. She was right. He was scared because he didn’t know. He’s never tried acting, so he didn’t even know where to start. He hesitated to jump in, and the hesitation quickly turned into fear and consumed him.

But if he decided to jump straight in, the activity wouldn’t be a subject of fear to him any more. It would either become a subject of joy or boredom.

Miso was right. But... she was coming at him from the wrong angle.

“People can be afraid of something because they don’t know it. But... sometimes they get afraid because they know exactly what it is.”

“Afraid because they know?”

“Yes.”

“.....”

“I’ve learned a lot today. But I can’t find myself wanting to do more of this. I’ll keep attending the club, of course. I’ll help out every once in a while as well. But I don’t want to invest a significant amount of time into this. Not as long as I keep thinking the way I do.”

Fear from the known.

Would spending a lot of time in the club now affect his life in the future in a meaningful way? What if instead of going to the club, Maru decided to study instead? What if he invested more time doing something else? What if he spent more time trying to find his actual dream...

Perhaps he would spend his time in the future regretting not doing things better now.

‘Why couldn’t you have given me better abilities?’

He looked up at the sky a little regretfully before shaking his head. He was being greedy again. He got to relive life again. This in itself was great luck and ability.

- The time you wasted today, is the time a dead person longed for prior to dying yesterday.

Maru often thought of this line whenever he woke up. It was an apt description of his current situation. The Maru of the future often regretted his past decisions. He longed to get another go at life. He ended up getting that exact chance. But instead of instantly knowing what he was going to do, he was sitting here wondering what his dreams were. What he wanted to do with life. Where he should go after high school.

Studying was an investment he was making into life while thinking over this problem. But he couldn’t see the road in front of him very well. He already traversed it before, but somehow that same road was even more difficult to go through than before. All this time, he thought everything would be good once he went back to the past, but the opposite was true.

What did Maru achieve during his 45 years of life? Would he be this lost now if he had a specific goal in life then? Maybe he would have an easier time traversing through the path of life if he had a goal in mind? That just brought him back to his original problem. He knew he had to do something, but he didn’t know what.

What Maru’s life came down to was like a leaf freely flying wherever the wind went. That is, he just kind of took everything as is.

“You’re really something else. I’ve never seen a high schooler this hesitant over everything,” Miso scrunched up her nose.

“Yeah. It’d be better if I just didn’t know anything. Knowing just a little about it is enough to really turn me off for some reason.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“It’s nothing. I was talking to myself. Oh, this doesn’t have anything to do with you, instructor. You’re a nice person. Very passionate as well. I want to get heated up about acting with you, but... I think I’ve cooled down too much. I don’t have the courage.”

Maru smiled. The best way to combat an awkward situation wasn’t to get angry, but smile it off.

“That expression!” Miso pointed at Maru with a snarl, “That look, almost as if you know everything about the world!”

Well, that was a pretty strong jab. The woman was really perceptive. He couldn’t do anything about it but to smile.

“Ugh...”

Miso massaged her temples in pain. Why was this woman caring so much for him? What about him made her so interested in him?

“Instructor,” he asked.

“What?”

Maru could feel the annoyance practically ooze from her words. She was very honest about her feelings. A rare sight nowadays with adults.

“Why do you invest so much time in me?”

“You really don’t know?”

“I don’t. Wouldn’t it be more efficient to spend this time with the other kids? You don’t even know if I’m going to end up acting, so why do you keep wasting time...”

“Wasting time?”

“?”

Miso’s eyebrows angled upwards. He must’ve hit a sore spot of some sort. Her pale skin turned pink as the blood rose up to her head.

“I think I get what kind of a person you are now.”

“You get me?”

“Yes. You’re really annoying!”

“.....”

Miso turned on the engine. The car started rolling back into the street.

“I get what you’re so troubled over. Good god.”

“What troubles me?”

“Yeah.”

Miso opened the window a little, letting the spring wind flow. Her face relaxed a bit as her hair whipped around with the wind.

“You’re looking too far into the future.”

“Too far?”

“Yeah. You’re looking way too far into the future. I mean, it makes sense that some kids of your age would think about this. About stuff like college entrance exams, college, and the military as well.”

Miso nodded in understanding, but her face quickly morphed into one of fury once more.

“But those are just dreams in the end. Stuff that doesn’t actually exist or has happened yet. Kids who worry over stuff like this usually start looking at the present if I shake them up a little bit. But you’re different.”

She sounded incredibly confident.

“I don’t know how, or why, but you seem to be looking at a very, very specific point in the future. Almost as if you were there before. Because it feels so real to you, you can’t help but keep worrying over it. Am I wrong?”

What an amazing person. Maru nodded. He had no reason to deny her the truth.

“I knew it. I knew it, god damn it. You’re way too imaginative. That’s what’s constantly making you think of the future. I’d be like that too! If I knew exactly what I was going to look like in the future, I wouldn’t be able to do what I’m doing now! I’d be nervous as shit!!”

Honk honk!!

Miso punched the wheel in frustration. The car in front of her moved sideways away from her lane.

“But you know, I think it’s ridiculously foolish to think so much about something that hasn’t even happened yet. Sure, you might think differently. Hell, I might as well.”

Miso breathed deeply as she turned to look at him.

“Walter Benjamin used to say this.”

Walter Benjamin. He’d heard of the name before. It was a frequent mention within the philosophy books he decided to read simpler philosophy books to try and improve himself. Thanks to it, he could tell what Miso was trying to say now.

“Progress...”

“is in each instance merely the first step, never the second, third, or $n + 1$.”

Miso looked at him with wide eyes. Maru thought over the quote. Along with Miso’s advice. Was he looking too far into the future? Was he worrying over something far too specific?

Progress.

He needed to step forward if he wanted to move. Without that one step, he would never make progress. Step by step, once the number of steps began piling up, he would be able to look back at what he made of his life. Perhaps he was just too afraid over something that had yet to even happen.

First step. The one step that was always the scariest one to take.

“And, to add on,” Miso continued, “if you take the wrong first step, you can just fix it at your second. If you took the wrong second step? You can still change direction at your third. Don’t be afraid. Don’t hesitate. From what I can see... You’ve thought for long enough. Maybe what you really need is to step forward?”

Miso closed her mouth and focused on driving. She didn’t seem to have anything more to say. Maru turned to look down at his two feet. Did he... make that first step yet?

* * *

By the time they came back to school, it was already 5pm. Miso didn’t choose to go all the way back to the school. She parked at the tonkatsu restaurant near school instead.

“Mister, can you fry up like 13 servings of food for us? Make it good.”

“Alright.”

She sat down on a table. 13 servings... Maru looked at Miso curiously.

“Have some. I know you’re hungry.”

“I’m fi...”

“Fine my ass! Shut it! Just eat! Do you really want to see me try to force feed you?”

Miso didn’t seem to want to let this one pass. Maru just decided to sit down lest he incurred her fury once more. He could hear the tonkatsu fry up in the kitchen. He thought back to their earlier conversation for a second.

“Come to think of it, I never heard your answer.”

“Ah, that.”

She wore an exhausted expression, appearing to lack the necessary energy to respond.

“Hey,” she called out.

“Yes?”

“Say you saw a piece of coal on the road. A really, really dark piece too. But you see something sparkling inside it as well. What would you do?”

“I’d try to wipe it to see what the thing was inside.”

“Right? You’d do that too, right?”

“...So you’re saying I’m that coal?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“Poop! You’re poop!”

“What?”

“I don’t even know anymore. Just do what you want. I don’t care. Flipping hell.”

“.....”

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I was just wondering if you were mad.”

“W-what?”

“Just wondering.”

“Say that again.”

“Can we just pretend you didn’t hear any of this?”

“I’ll rip your jaw off!”

Miso was acting like a cat whose tail was just stepped on, which made Maru smile a little. He felt a lot better for some reason. Almost as if one of his problems was solved just now. Perhaps blending in with other people in such a way was a sort of a talent. Right then, Miso gave him a small glance nervously.

“Soo... you wanna try it?”

Hah. She really doesn’t change, does she? Maru shook his head.

“Nope.”

“Ugh, come on!”

“But...”

“Hm?”

“I’d like to try something else.”

One step. He decided he might as well step forward just a little bit.

Chapter 37

Maru walked up the stairs of the school building, with food in his hand. The smell of sweat washed over his face upon opening the auditorium door. He could feel the gazes of everyone in the room as they stared at him with surprise.

“Let’s eat!”

Miso put down the dishes of food with a shout. The kids all rushed over with a starving gaze.

“Thank you for the food!”

“Thank you!”

Each of them took a plastic container for themselves as they sat back down. Maru joined in as well. Looking around, he realized the rest of the club members were sitting in a circle eating together.

The group developed a strong bond over the last few weeks. They were talking about practice even during meals. Maru took his food and walked over to the stage. He was planning on eating in one of the seats there, until Miso walked over to sit with him.

“What are you doing by yourself?”

“I have no reason to be there with them. They’re talking about important stuff over there.”

Right then, the group of eleven stopped talking for a second to look at him.

“Hey! What are you doing over there? Come over, Maru!”

It was Yoonjung. She was frantically waving him over. Even Joonghyuk was giving him looks. Not to mention Dojin and Daemyung. How nice of them.

“Don’t worry, kids. I need to talk with the head for a bit,” Miso responded.

The kids made an ‘aha’ face as they resumed their conversations with one another.

Head, huh. He hadn’t heard that nickname in a month.

“So, what was that thing you wanted to talk about before?” Miso asked as she stuffed her mouth with three pieces of katsu. Maru responded after taking a small sip from his soup.

“I heard that you were going into the preliminaries in three weeks.”

“That’s right. If you want to join, you really should...”

Maru shook his head.

“I don’t want to participate in the competition.”

“Didn’t you say you wanted to?”

“I do. But not a part of the competition itself.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to intrude on them. The rest of the club members tried hard during the last month.”

“Hm.”

“I heard the roles had all been chosen as well. The props are all finished too. Is there even space for me there anymore?”

“There isn’t.”

Miso answered right away with a nod.

“You don’t want to take their place?”

“I’m not that desperate.”

“Oh, so you will if you do get desperate?”

“There’s not much I won’t do if I want to live.”

He would do anything if it kept his wife and daughter from starving. That was the decision his 45 year old self came up with. Though he had no one to direct that mindset to anymore, he still firmly upheld its values.

“You looked kind of selfish right there.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No. People need to be greedy. They need to find their own place in life. They can’t just wait for things to be handed to them, they need to take it. Only then can they afford to start worrying about others.”

“That’s true.”

He recalled what the woman had told him after his death. To not be as selfless as he was before. But Maru had never thought of him having a selfless life. He just had decent manners and had common sense.

Return what you are given, and follow rules when you can. Don’t try to affect people around you negatively. Those were the only things he followed.

Then again, under the state of the contemporary world, he supposed even that could be considered ‘selfless’.

“So, what did you want to ask about?”

“I wanted to try being in a play.”

“Hm?”

“You told me, didn’t you? About volunteer plays that were done by the government. It can even be done for children. I just want to try to see what it’s like.”

“Hm.”

Miso finished off her food as she thought for a second. She slapped her belly with satisfaction before continuing.

“So I take it that you want to take it easy? Without putting in much effort?”

“I suppose so.”

“I’m telling you this now, but there are no plays that are easy. There are ones that have shorter prep times though.”

"I'm sorry. I just wanted relatively quick plays."

"I see. So you just want to dip your toe in the water. Well, I have no reason to stop you. I have a friend who does puppet plays at different kindergartens. She works with well known stories that are usually from the Aesopica or Andersen's stories. It's not a very easy task. Sometimes, puppet plays are even more difficult than normal plays. It's relatively quicker though, so I'll introduce you. How do the weekends sound?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Alright. Try it, then. It won't be easy though," Miso grinned mischievously. She took out her phone and called someone. After a few words were exchanged, she handed the phone over to Maru.

"Take it."

"Alright."

Maru took the phone. He could hear kids on the other side, along with a lady's pained words: "pulling sis's hair makes big sis go owie." He could guess what was happening on the other side pretty well.

"Are you alright?" Maru was the first to speak. The lady responded almost immediately from the other side.

- Ah yes, just a minute, please! I'm sorry. Waaaait!

At the same time.

'Hey! Don't you know how scary big sis can be if she gets mad?' The lady started to chide the kids a bit before directing a 'please give me a break for a second' to Maru. The other side only became quiet after 3 more minutes.

- Phew! Hello?

"Are you fine now?"

- Ah, yes.

"Kids really don't listen during that age, don't they? They're devilish at the age of seven."

- Ah... yes.

He could hear the lady's confusion in her voice. Maru smiled bitterly. He spoke like a parent without even realizing it.

"I called because I wanted to participate in one of your plays."

- Ah, right, right. Could we go over your age real quick again, though? I'm very sorry. Seventeen... Right?

She sounded unsure. Maru agreed for now.

- I'm thirty. A friend of Miso's.

"Yes. You can drop the formalities if you'd like."

- Would that be fine?

"Of course."

- I'll try to speak more casually, then...

Maru looked at Miso, suppressing a grin. So this is what they meant about how opposites attract. The woman was the complete opposite of Miso.

"What is it?" Miso asked. Maru put a hand over the microphone as he responded.

"I just found it surprising."

"Surprising?"

"How her personality is so different from yours."

"Shush with the weird comments and take the call. She's going to cry if you keep ignoring her."

"She cries?"

"Quickly!"

Maru put the phone back on his ear.

"Hello?"

- ...Um, did I say something wrong?

"No, not at all."

- Really? I thought I might've said something wrong because you suddenly went silent. Phew. That's good.

The lady sighed in relief. She seemed to be quite a handful as well. Were the people around Miso all like this?

"You can be casual with me."

- Oh, right. Mm... but actually, I think it'd be rude to be so casual when I haven't even met you in person. Wouldn't you agree?

"Haha, right you are."

- So you wanted to try doing plays for children?

"Yes. If I won't be a bother, I'd like to try helping out."

- Bother? We were just in need of more hands! I did ask Miso for help, but she said she was severely allergic to children... That's a bit mean, isn't it?

"Yes, it is," Maru responded after making sure Miso couldn't hear what the lady was saying. "Is there anything that I'll need to bring?" He continued.

- No, nothing of the sort. You just have to come right away and practice a bit.

“Right away?”

- Yes. Weren't you coming tomorrow?

Ah, so the word “weekend” meant “tomorrow” to Miso, huh. Maru turned to look at the lady, who was giving him a ‘V’ sign with a grin on her face. What a woman.

“I am, I am. I'll be there tomorrow. Where should I go?”

- Suwon city.

The same city, thankfully.

- Can you come out to the station by 9 o'clock tomorrow morning?

“Yes, of course.”

- Alright, perfect. Thank you, one of the people who is usually here to help us had to drop out for tomorrow, so we were about to be really underhanded.

“The one who should be thankful is me. At least I have something to do now.”

The lady finished the call after saying ‘see you tomorrow’. The way she spoke just made him smile. She had a very calming, comfortable voice.

“Done?” Miso asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

“What made you suddenly decide to act, by the way? I mean I'm happy about it, but still.”

“I decided that I might as well take that first step. I do like plays. I was interested from the start as well. I was just afraid of the time I might waste my time doing it. I'm not ready to go all in yet, though. Maybe I'll quit after a few tries, even.”

“You don't seem like that kind of a person to me. Kids like you get really focused on one thing once they really get into it. That's one reason why I obsess over them a lot.”

“Who knows. I like to think I don't get committed to things.”

“I don't think so. People often think that they know themselves better than anyone. But many of them are also the type that won't even realize that they have shit on their back until someone else tells them about it. Occasionally, someone else's evaluation you might be more valuable than your own.”

“I'll admit that.”

“Admitting is easy. You just never listen.”

“Instructor.”

“What?”

“You don't have a boyfriend, do you?”

“.....”

Maru dodged the plastic fork that was thrown at his face. He was pretty confident that he knew what kind of a person she was now.

“You really are a strange one. Go on, now. Like you said, there really isn’t a place for you here anymore.”

“Yes, I should.”

“Do think about it carefully, though. I might be totally mistaken, but I do see potential in you. You should try it. Forget about your fears. Actors begin their career by throwing themselves straight into the flame. They ignore how society might view them, how they might view themselves, and the rules that bind them and jump straight in.”

Miso stood up. The club members looked to be nearly finished with their food as well. They were all looking at the two of them, ready to start practice again.

“Don’t get jealous of them in the future, you hear?”

“Of course.”

Miso stepped forward. Maru watched the club resume practice for a few minutes before getting up himself. It was seven now. He’s never been at the auditorium this late before. He could see the others practicing their blocking as he walked over to the exit. Maru didn’t want to bother them. He quietly opened the door, and whispered “goodbye” as he left the auditorium.

* * *

The corridor of the school was still very well lit, despite being so late. Maru could hear different noises coming out of other club rooms still. The toy club had sounds of hammers beating against wood coming out of it, and Maru could hear someone in the music club practicing with their bass guitar.

They were all working very hard. Each of them were buying these skills with their time in order to get what they wanted. Hopefully they could all get what they wanted out of this. Maru headed down to the first floor with a bag of trash in hand. The first floor was completely dark, save for the teachers’ office down the hallway. It was pretty quiet, too.

It was his first time seeing the first floor so silent. It felt quite new to him for some reason. Maybe because he finally made a decision?

Maru threw away the bag of trash into one of the recycling bins before getting back on his bike. On the way back home, he found a few students walking on the streets together.

“Where do you want to meet tomorrow?”

“Are we doing anything tomorrow?”

He could hear them talking in the distance. A smile formed on Maru’s face.

“I’m going to do whatever I want to do tomorrow,” he found himself responding under his breath.

Chapter 38

Maru barely managed to wake up on Sunday morning. He pushed aside his thick blankets as he stood up from his bed. It was 7:30am. He opened the door and stepped into the kitchen. It was empty. His family was atheist, so their Sunday mornings were slow to start. He washed up in the bathroom and made himself a simple breakfast out of some rice and eggs. It was eight by the time he finished his meal. Dad came out of his room with a terrible bedhead.

“You going somewhere?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“I’m going to do a play.”

“Ah, sure.”

Maru grabbed the handle of the front door as he said his goodbyes. Right before he exit, he could hear his father’s delayed reaction.

“A play?”

“Yes. A play.”

“Eh?”

Maru just smiled in response.

* * *

Maru took the road that led him to Suwon station. Once he arrived, he found the floor of the station was covered in metal sheets. He remembered this station was under construction for quite a long time in his life.

It was the beginning of May. The time of year when it was getting pretty warm, but the occasional cold wind of winter was still present to disrupt the notion of spring. Maru noticed a food truck on the other side of the road. The ones that sold warm soy milk and a nice toast sandwich. There were five of them. They were all selling something similar, but the popularity between them was clearly different.

‘This gets removed soon as well, if I remember correctly.’

A few years later, government workers would place flower vases on the parking space of these food trucks. The owners of the trucks would feel quite wronged by this, but at the same time, restaurant owners in the area would have been annoyed by the truck owners not even paying property tax doing their business.

It was a situation where no clear winner could be seen on either side. Maru bought himself a toast. He’d already had breakfast, but his body was never satisfied by any amount of food he ate.

‘I don’t know when these food trucks would leave, so I might as well have some now.’

Maru walked to the front of the station after filling himself up with toast and soup. It was ten minutes before 9 o’clock.

Vrrr, the phone sprang to life.

He was getting a call from an unknown number.

- Is this Han Maru?

"Yes, it is."

It was the woman he talked to through Miso yesterday.

- Where are you?

"I'm right outside Suwon station."

- Really? Hold on. Can you come out to the road right below the pedestrian bridge? I'll try to find you. I'm in a red car.

"Yes."

Maru walked towards the road after hanging up. He could see a small red car zoom closer to him through the traffic. There wasn't really a place to park nearby, so Maru walked over to the intersection nearby with the car in tow.

"Han Maru?"

"Yes."

"Nice to meet you. Am I late?"

"You were right on time. Can I get on?"

"Sure."

Maru got in the shotgun. As soon as he sat down, he got blasted with the scent of fresh lemon. It was very different compared to Miso's stuffy car. In front of him were tiny little dolls that decorated the car. There was even a small rabbit hanging on the back mirror.

There were ten of these dolls at the very least. Maru looked back to see if there were any more. Ah, of course there were. He could even see little finger puppets in the back of the car.

"There's a lot of stuff here, isn't there?" The woman welcomed Maru.

Maru turned to look at the woman for the first time. She was quite pretty. Her long black hair came down to her shoulders. Her face looked younger than 30, but her eyes clearly looked older. She had a few wrinkles on her face, presumably from smiling so much. She had a small dimple on her face as well.

She looked like a soft lady. The polar opposite of Miso. He couldn't even begin to imagine the kind of conversations she entertained in Miso's company.

"Are these for your plays?" Maru asked, pointing to the back.

"Yes. Some of them are for plays, and some of them I give away to children."

She changed gears and started driving. Strangely, the car she was driving was manual. She was accustomed to changing gears with the clutch. For a split second, Maru could see a visage of an experienced taxi driver overlap with her face.

“It’s a bit weird that I’m not driving an auto, right?”

She seemed to have noticed his stares. Maru shook his head.

“Manual feels way better to drive than auto. Auto is easier for sure, but when you’re driving a tru...”

Oops, he did it again. He closed his mouth and glanced at her.

“What did you just...”

“That’s what my dad told me. Manual’s just better.”

“Aha, I see. My father told me the same thing. That’s why he made me get the manual license when I first got it. I might as well try to go for a commercial driving license when I have time.”

“A commercial one?”

“Yes,” she responded, smiling brightly.

Those words were strange coming from someone with her looks, but he decided to ignore that for now.

“Ah, speaking of which, I haven’t told you my name, have I? My name is Kang Soojin. Like I said yesterday, I’m thirty, and... I just do odd jobs.”

“I’m Han Maru, a student. I’m working on our school’s play under instructor Miso. And you can speak casually to me now.”

“Would that be fine?”

“Yes.”

“Mm, then.. I’ll... try to be casual?” She was having a hard time for some reason.

So even a woman of her age could be that cute. Maru looked forward with a smile on his face.

“Have you ever played with children?”

“Yes.”

Of course he has. A lot, too. He’s done all sorts of things for his daughter. He had to invent all sorts of different faces for his little princess.

“Is that so? That’s a bit of a surprise. Not many kids your age get to experience that.”

“That’s true.”

“It might still be hard, though. A few of them are pretty mischievous. Not that it makes me mad. They’re all cute. By the way... do you get angry easily?” She sounded a little nervous. Maybe she had a few people who got into fights?

“I can’t get angry. Don’t worry too much.”

“Phew, that’s good. You looked kind of scary. Oh, sorry, that’s not what I meant...”

She looked at Maru with a smile. Maru looked back into her eyes, prompting a thought bubble to pop up.

[He looked a bit scary because of his initial expression, but he seems fine. That’s good. I was a bit scared, but he looks like a good kid.]

Her thoughts were the same as her words. She turned her handle to the right with a happy smile. This was actually a pretty useful ability. It allowed him to see how different people were inside compared to their outside.

‘Even me, too.’

The car started going up a steep slope. The car came to a stop in a suburban neighborhood, 20 minutes away from the station. They were at a 2 floor daycare.

There was a woman who seemed to be a teacher of the place waiting in front. She was waving her hand vigorously at the two of them.

“She’s someone who works here. She’s nice. Let’s get off,” Soojin explained.

Soojin gave her greetings before opening the trunk of her car. The teacher came over to help out with carrying a few dolls inside. Maru picked up a few as well.

The three of them switched over to slippers once inside, and walked over to what seemed to be the living room of the building. From there, Maru could see a few kids running around with teachers inside.

“Is this private?” Maru asked.

Soojin nodded in affirmation.

‘It’s pretty nice here.’

He’s taken his daughter to a few kindergartens back in the day. The one they chose was pretty expensive, but since his wife was also working at the time, they were able to afford it. They also thought about leaving the girl to their parents but realized that wouldn’t work once they learned how difficult it was to raise a kid.

“This is pretty nice. You must get plenty of financial support from the government as well. Pretty well built, and lots of teachers... Do you guys also offer transportation for the kids?”

Soojin turned to look at him in bewilderment, making Maru cough a few times in nervousness.

“You know a lot, don’t you, Maru? You’re like an adult,” Soojin mentioned.

“I’m not like an adult. I just know a lot of random stuff. Random useless stuff.”

“No, it’s important to know this kind of stuff. You’ll be a lovely father when you get married in the future.”

Soojin smiled. Man, whoever takes this woman as his wife would be one lucky guy.

Maru put away the dolls in one of the bigger boxes as Soojin instructed. The kids walked over with a curious look on their faces. Most of them seemed to be around four years old.

“What’s this?”

“What that?”

“What?”

They were all speaking primitively.

“They’re dolls.”

Soojin kneeled down to the kids’ height as she explained. She sounded just like the other teachers as she talked. Maru watched for a bit, before remembering something Soojin said about him and going to the restroom.

That comment about him seeming scary...

He’s never heard that comment before in his life. Sure, he’s heard stuff like how he looked playful, mischievous, et cetera... But never once was he called scary.

He leaned down onto one of the kid’s mirrors and looked at his face.

‘...I do look a bit stiff.’

Maybe because he thought of random things too much? Maru tried smiling at the mirror. Good, at least his smile wasn’t stiff yet.

He heard the kids’ laughter upon leaving the bathroom. He started walking a bit faster to check out what was happening.

“Haha.”

The first thing Maru saw was Soojin wearing a rabbit’s mask. She seemed to have worn it to play with the children, but the reaction she was getting out of them... was far from pleasant.

“Monster rabbit!”

“It’s a monster rabbit!”

She did look a little abnormal. Probably because the teeth on the mask were so big. The kids were punching her as she crouched down on the floor in a fetal position.

It might seem like a punch from a 4 year old wouldn’t hurt that much. But Maru knew the answer to that very well, from having raised a daughter of his own.

It hurts like hell.

“W-wait. Kids!”

“Wahahaha!”

Well, at least the kids are happy. Maru thought back to his conversation with Soojin the day before. This was probably what was happening over the phone.

“Kids! I’m hurting!”

Of course, the kids didn’t even bother stopping. Maru watched the spectacle with a small smile on his face. At least, he did until Soojin took off her mask and started glaring at him.

“We’ll practice for a bit.”

“Ah, please do.”

Soojin left the children to the teacher and walked over to Maru. She grabbed his hand and headed for the stairs.

“We’re going to start after the kids take their naps. Other kids will be coming afterwards, so we should practice here.”

“Yes. But ah, you’re trying to be polite again.”

“Excuse me? Ah, sorry. Force of habit. It’s annoying, isn’t it?”

“I’m fine. Just do as you will, sis. Can I call you big sis?”

“Sure. Call me whatever you want. Miso calls me a white puppy sometimes.”

White puppy... Hm, that fit better than he thought.

“We’ll practice for four hours. Are you familiar with the fable about the sun and the wind, and that story about the brother and sister who turned into the sun and the moon?”

“Of course.”

“We’ll be doing those two today, with these.”

Soojin took out a few hand puppets with confidence. A tiger, two kids, a travel, and the sun and the moon.

“Looks fun, doesn’t it?”

She seemed more excited than the kids. Maru tried putting on the dolls in his fingers as well. As soon as he did, Soojin asked him a question.

“How is it?”

“Huh?”

“Is it well made?”

Her eyes were sparkling with the expectation for praise. He’s seen those eyes somewhere. Ah, he remembered seeing those eyes from his little daughter, when she handed him her drawing for the first time.

“Did you make it yourself?”

“Yes. How are they?”

“Woow, they’re really good. They look store-bought.”

“Really? They’re that good?”

Soojin smiled as wide as her dolls themselves.

“But Miso always makes fun of my dolls.”

“That lady can never hand out compliments.”

“Right? Right?”

Soojin’s smile got wider when Maru nodded. She must get teased pretty often. He could picture it with ease. That expression that Miso would wear as she teases Soojin mercilessly.

“I’ll tell you the story first. We don’t want the main content of the story changing. Ad-libbing in the play is fine, but only if I can properly react to it and if it doesn’t stray too much from the story.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to ad-lib. It’s my first time, after all.”

“Really? Anyway, come over here for a bit.”

Soojin opened the script she printed out. Maru stepped up next to her. He could smell the fresh scent of lemon coming off of her.

His heart skipped a beat. But right then, a picture of his pouting wife flashed in his head.

“Pft.”

“What’s up?”

“No, I just got reminded of something.”

Soojin nodded and started reading.

Chapter 39

“Don’t look away! The audience is going to think you look stupid if you do that! Dojin, you, especially! Think as you move. You’re going to overlap with the other kids if you stand there!” Miso shouted.

Dojin stepped aside with a quick apology, and in turn crashed into Daemyung. The two of them stumbled together on stage.

“Hey!!”

Soyeon and Yurim flinched from being so close to the shouting. Miso put a hand over her face and motioned the entire club over to her.

“3 weeks...”

“.....”

“We need to do this in 3 weeks in front of judges. In front of audiences. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You know this, and yet you’re acting like this?! Go run a few laps outside. Run!!”

“Yes ma’am!”

The club ran out of the auditorium pretty much immediately. Miso sighed after they all left the room.

“It just doesn’t feel like enough.”

She was shouting at them, but the kids have become pretty skilled at this point already. Up to a satisfactory amount, as a matter of fact. But she still wanted more. Especially because they were all so driven.

Just a little bit more, and the play would become so much more powerful...

Miso stepped outside into one of the empty classrooms. She opened the window and looked outside. The students were all starting to run outside one by one.

The first one to finish was Taejoon. He didn’t have much stamina, but boy was he fast. The next one out was Geunseok. Joonghyuk and Minsung came afterwards, and then Dojin. Daemyung ran out at around the same time as the girls.

“Daemyung! You walking?!” Miso shouted.

“No ma’am!”

She could hear the response back faintly from the ground.

The kids started running like hell on the track. She told them that they could come in after completing five laps before sitting down on a seat. A while later, Taejoon walked back in with a loud huff. There was a bit of sweat on his forehead. The others all came in after him, with Soyeon being the last one.

Miso opened her mouth upon their collective arrival.

“Steady your breaths! Feel the way your throat opens and closes every time you take a breath. I told you the way your throat opens up when you yawn was the most ideal form you want to take when you vocalize, remember? But actors need to make different kinds of sounds for different occasions. When they’re happy, sad, tired, energetic, whatever. Right now, this is the shape your throat would take when you’re tired. Pay attention to how much you inhale, how much your lungs expand, and how your throat moves. Try to feel it. Don’t try to memorize all of it, just understand this is how your body works when it gets tired. You get it?”

“Yes ma’am!”

“You can’t act if you’re dumb! You need to feel the way every single part of your body moves at all times! Only after months of being aware of your movements can you really act. Acting naturally for the very first time? Don’t joke with me. That kind of stuff doesn’t happen in real life. You can only act when you have the basics down. Understand?”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Good. We’ll begin again after ten minutes. We’re also going to do runs like this starting next week. If you run out of stamina like this again after just a single run again... It won’t be pretty.”

The club all swallowed nervously.

“Geunseok.”

“Yes.”

The boy ran up to her immediately. He was the main character of this year’s competition. It would be a hard role, but the boy was fit for the job. He was more serious about acting than anyone.

He had the foundations, and the talent as well. In these competitions, there also existed individual acting prizes. Being able to snag them early on would help the boy get himself into a good school for acting. That’s why Miso needed to pressure the boy harder. She didn’t want him to become complacent.

“Did you analyze your character?”

“Yes.”

“Alright then. What kind of a character is Jeongsu in the play?”

Miso has never made high school club members analyze characters before. After all, kids usually joined the club out of simple curiosity, rather than actual passion. That’s why Miso just asked for a simple report of the characters from the other club members. But she was sure Geunseok was going to go professional and therefore had no intention of training the boy lightly.

“Jeongsu is a timid character. He wants to get closer to his friends, but doesn’t have the courage to do so. He’s also quick to anger. Enough to shout at a friend just because of a slightly offensive joke. And...”

“What do you think his elementary school life was like?”

“Excuse me?”

Geunseok looked a little taken aback, which caused Miso to click her tongue.

“I ask you to analyze a character, and here you are reading a script. I didn’t ask you for the surface details! Tell me about who Jeongsu is! What kind of a life he’s lived!”

“.....”

“Any idiot can tell Jeongsu’s timid and hot-tempered! Everyone here knows this! It’s literally in the script! Mumbling, frustratedly, angrily, stomping the floor...”

Miso opened the script and started reading. Geunseok’s face started stiffening up, making him look way scarier than usual.

“What, are you mad?” Miso asked.

“Yes.”

“Because I shouted?”

“No. Because I thought this would be easy. I should’ve known you wanted more than just the obvious.”

Good. This boy was good. Miso handed him the script.

“Want me to teach you everything from one to ten, like I would a child?”

“No, I don’t want something like that. I want to be an actor who thinks.”

“Do your best, you hear? You seem to know what you’re missing, so I won’t speak any further. But here’s a piece of advice. If you think you’re about done, think again. Think if there really isn’t anything more you can think of. If you think more and more, you’ll always be able to find something. Then you’ll realize that you were only at step 0 all along, out of god knows how many steps. But that’s what growth is. Feeling that sense of loss is what helps you grow. Get it?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I’m only harsh on you because I see talent. Don’t try to go for mediocrity if you really want to be good. You need to be passionate.”

“Yes!”

Miso waved the boy away. He was a good kid. She liked how the boy’s fire just didn’t die out.

‘He actually resembles that crazy idiot in a way. They even share the same last name and all.’

That idiot who started the acting club all by himself... The one with an unbelievable amount of passion. He would read the scripts again and again, enough for the script itself to start tearing apart at its edges. His passion was great enough to drive everyone else in the club forward along with him. The club wouldn’t exist without him and the advisor.

‘I wonder what I would’ve been doing without them.’

Maybe she would have become a comic book artist. She definitely wouldn’t be having this much fun though. In any case, that boy Geunseok had a lot in common with that madman. She sat down for a bit as she watched the kids read their script. Her phone started ringing.

It was a call from the crazy.

“Speak of the devil. What’s up?”

- I heard you treated our guys to a meal yesterday. Just wanted to say thanks.

“It’s no big deal. You called because of that?”

- Well, that, and I wanted to brag a little.

“Brag?”

- I met director Yoo at the set yesterday. Even exchanged greetings.

“What? Really?”

Director Yoo Chulmin. Now there was a name. The man was the director of one of the most famous playwrights in the country, the ‘Sky Seas’, and the current president of the Korean Acting Association.

Every one of his works were sold out, and all sorts of famous actors were dying to be cast in the man's movies. Miso's seen the man a few times too, but even she has never gotten the chance to speak to him.

- I know I'd get remembered as one of the many no-name actors, but it's still cool, you know?

"Yeah, I'm jealous. Why was he here?"

- I heard he's basically like a brother to my current director. I had no idea.

"Isn't this a great opportunity? You might..."

- Don't act through connections, you remember that saying?

He cut her off right then and there. She didn't bother refuting. She knew the man would succeed regardless.

"So in the end, you just wanted to brag?"

- Yeah, there's that, but there was one other thing.

"What other thing?"

- ...I was wondering if my brother was doing well.

"Brother?"

- Yeah. I couldn't contact home for a few months now because I was so busy, but my brother told me a few days ago that he got into Blue Sky. That kid... he took that smart brain of his and just went into a shit school.

"Wait, is this kid Geunseok?"

- Yeah. Didn't you notice a kid who looks like me? Tall, decent body, and a tiny bit better looking than me. Smarter, too. Wait shit, he's just better than me in every way, isn't he? Whatever. I'm better than him at acting anyway.

Miso could hear the man laugh to himself across the phone. It was Hong Geunsoo. Miso took a small glance at Geunseok. No wonder the boy looked familiar.

"Hey! You never told me you had a brother!"

- Oh, did I not tell you?

"You just straight up never talked about home."

- Really? Well anyways, take care of him. He must have a reason of his own for wanting to do acting with that brain of his.

Miso looked at her phone strangely for a second. That voice of his just now... sounded very bitter. Why was he talking like that? Any other time he would sound like someone who was on a motherload of drugs.

"Anything you want to tell me about?"

- Not really. Just take good care of him.

Liar. He always said 'not really' when he was lying. It was one of those things that everyone except him was aware of.

"Hey, be serious here."

-

"Hey! Bastard!"

The club members flinched in the middle of their reading and looked over at her. Miso just waved them away before continuing.

- Don't go easy on him.

"I won't, obviously."

- Also.

"Also?"

- It's nothing. I might just be mistaken here. Just... I want him to have a dream. And even if he fails to achieve it, I don't want him getting too hurt from it.

"Hey, I can help him achieve his dream, but I can't be cushioning him when he fails. That's your job. Also, come visit every once in a while. Got it?"

- Yes, yes. I will, I will.

Geunsoo cut the phone call short after that.

"Geunsoo's brother, huh."

Generation 1 and generation 13 of Blue Sky. Miso put her hands together and rested her chin on top. Now there was another reason to be even harsher on Geunseok. Speaking of the devil, the boy turned around to look at her.

* * *

Geunseok looked back for a second. Instructor Miso was looking at him with narrowed eyes. Her twisted lips seemed to imply that she was swearing at him under her breath.

Was she still angry?

He definitely needed to get a grip on himself. They only had three weeks from now on. Not a lot of time at all. Each passing day only worsened his nerves. He wanted to win an award, like his brother did.

'Big bro.'

Geunsoo meant a lot of things to Geunseok. Just the word 'brothers' wasn't enough to describe their relationship.

Sometimes, the man was his idol. Sometimes, a rival. Sometimes, a loving brother, and sometimes a hated enemy. When he was young, he just couldn't understand the man.

Geunseok thought back to his elementary school years. He would come back home straight after school because he didn't want to go study at an academy. Right as he stepped into the house, he could see his dad shouting at his brother, who was kneeling on the floor. Mom grabbed him and took him outside immediately. A few moments later, his brother came out of the house with a big grin on his face.

[Geunseok! Listen to your parents, alright?]

That was the one thing his brother always said after getting in a massive fight with dad. The man was just a bag of mysteries. Someone who never stopped hurting his parents. That was the impression Geunseok had of his brother.

He still remembered what his mother told him on that day.

[Geunseok, you'll listen to your parents, won't you?]

That day, he responded with a 'yes' without any hesitation in his voice. Just because of how pathetic his own brother looked walking out of the house.

Chapter 40

His brother didn't contact the family again after that. Geunseok only learned this later, but his brother had gone off to do military service during that time period.

His dad's fury was inevitable. After all, his brother practically disappeared for two years, before saying he wanted to drop out of college and become an actor.

To others, it seemed that his brother just wasn't cut out for studying. After all, the man couldn't stay still for even ten seconds. His father often said even if studying wasn't all there was to life, it was still important to know the basics. So his brother always ended up doing the bare minimum. And every time, he would complain about studying to Geunseok.

Despite the five years that passed since then, Geunseok still remembered those words. He remembered how he responded, too.

"But mom and dad are happy if we do it."

And his brother said:

"But it's boring even if they are happy."

In the end, his brother argued with their dad for a year straight before going to an engineering school. Apparently he won his dad over with the words, 'I'd rather become the head of a snake rather than the tail of a dragon' back then.

Geunseok could somewhat remember what his brother was like in high school. He remembered his mother saying 'You were only six then. You can remember it?' when he asked about it.

In any case, during that time his brother would come back home late everyday. He got into a lot of fights because of that, too.

Yeah, they really did fight a lot, didn't they?

Geunseok thought of what happened during his brother's senior year. His brother and his dad were arguing about academics vs acting again. That was probably the first time his dad hit his brother.

He remembered it really well. His brother's face snapped sideways, and his mom dragged him into his room. He caught a glimpse of his brother as the door closed. Smiling. Victoriously.

After that night, dad didn't say anything more to his brother. Dad didn't even budge when his brother invited him to watch his play.

Until then, Geunseok had never seen his brother's play. His mother wasn't brave enough to go watch the play dad was furious about, and he didn't really want to see it either. Around then, he was going to a small academy right before entering elementary school. It became routine at the house to see his brother come back to the house covered in sweat an hour after him.

At the time, Geunseok couldn't understand his brother for the life of him. He wasn't stupid. Geunseok knew that for a fact. The man would memorize entire scripts in a single sitting.

Brother was eerily focused when he looked at the script. If he spared some of that energy for studying, surely mom and dad wouldn't have had a problem with him acting. But his brother didn't care. It was almost as if the time spent studying was time wasted on him.

That winter, brother got accepted into a no-name college. Dad clicked his tongue annoyedly, but still offered to cover his son's tuition. He must've been pretty happy on the inside. Mother also repeatedly said 'you should study for real now that you're in college.'

Brother just nodded.

Geunseok could tell pretty easily that his brother had no intention of listening to her. That was also the winter when Geunseok finished studying the rest of the coursework for elementary school. At that point, it became his goal to study middle school material while in elementary school. Even his teachers at the academies praised me.

"Your son is very smart," the man said over the phone.

That was the day Geunseok attended a buffet with his parents. His brother didn't come. Brother was in the acting club even then.

"Good job, son. Good job."

"Geunseok, did you want anything as a present?"

Geunseok's parents were beaming. Praises upon praises came on his way. He loved studying. It wasn't that hard, and it made his parents happy. That was the day when the three of them went to the department store to buy his presents. His dad didn't hesitate to use his credit card, and his mom bought him all the toys and clothes he wanted.

Why didn't his brother study? It was so easy! His brother was just so strange to him. That day when they got back home, he found his brother cooking instant ramen for himself.

“If only he could take after his younger brother,” his dad commented.

He felt conflicted from hearing this. He was happy to be recognized by his parents, but at the same time, he felt sorry for his brother.

Maybe that's why Geunseok felt the need to walk up to him while he was eating.

“Bro, do you want me to teach you how to study?”

Dad laughed joyfully, and mom smiled as she said “Geunseok’s all grown up now, trying to take care of his elder brother already” from the back.

Back then, he really did just want to be helpful. No, he was just trying to feel prideful after hearing so many praises from his parents. In any case, his brother looked up at him quietly for a second.

Geunseok thought his brother would get mad. Or just keep eating his food with a sad look on his face. But his brother didn’t do either of those things.

“Hey, little bro, this is pretty tasty too, you know? Want a bite?”

* * *

Geunseok’s brother declared that he would leave the city for his college afterwards. He wanted to live by himself there.

Around the end of december, he also told the family that he would be performing in a play hosted by the city. Of course, their dad ignored it completely.

Mom had changed a little bit, though. She finally gathered the courage to try watching a play by her son. Dad didn’t say anything about it. He probably allowed it since this was going to be brother’s last play.

“Geunseok, do you want to come too?”

Geunseok nodded without hesitation. He was pretty curious too. Just what was it about acting that made his brother give up studying? The two of them went to city hall, where the play was taking place. They went to the waiting room first to find Geunseok’s brother.

Geunseok stood on his toes, trying to find his brother in the crowd. It wasn’t very hard, since the person in question was in the spotlight then.

His brother was... shining. Everyone was looking at his brother. A single word from him either simmered the room with a nervous air, or caused it to explode in joyous laughter. Even at Geunseok’s young age, he was able to tell how important his brother was here. It was almost like looking at a completely different person. Even his mom seemed surprised. Thankfully, his brother noticed them on his own. He walked up to them and told them in his usual tone of voice,

“Well, enjoy the show.”

Geunseok realized then that his brother wasn’t any different now than he was inside the house. The only thing that was different was how he looked at his brother.

Soon, the play began. Brother was... amazing, to say the least. That memory didn't last long though. His brother left for college shortly afterwards, and Geunseok returned to his routine life of studying.

He felt great whenever his teachers praised him at school. That was the only thing he studied for. Praises.

While the other kids were struggling with addition, he could tell them about stuff like equations. He wrote his name in Chinese characters and introduced himself in English as well. Even the other kids told him he was amazing.

It felt great to be the center of attention. He didn't want to forgo this feeling. Tests, quizzes, homeworks... he made sure to always score full points on them. His parents always showered him with praises when he showed them his tests. Along with presents. That feeling was exhilarating. He felt like he was loved by everyone.

By his third year of elementary school, he completely forgot about his brother's play. The only thing he saw in that year was his brother leaving home after declaring that he was dropping out of college.

How disappointing.

Geunseok would try harder to make his parents happy.

With that, he graduated elementary school. He finished his placement tests for middle school perfectly as well. Again, his parents were ecstatic. That's when he formed a plan in his head.

Everyone would love him even more if he went to a good college. He studied and studied, and took his first test in middle school.

And...

He got in 5th place in the class. For the first time in his life, he wasn't in first place. 24th in the entire grade as well. The hair on his back rose up. Suddenly, he felt scared. This wasn't good enough. This wouldn't do anything at all.

That night, he received a bored response out of his dad for the first time.

"Good job," he said.

And that was all. No praises, no gifts. He felt nervous. He grit his teeth and got to studying. Even when his friends wanted to play, he refused them and studied as much as he could.

Each nosebleed gave him a high, almost as if he got himself a new achievement.

It was a symbol of his at school. Each red dot on his notebook gave him confidence.

And then... the finals came. Maybe it was because he slept late studying, but he failed on the very first day. He didn't even have to look at his grades to know. He double checked his answers with his friends, and his score only came out to about... a 70.

It felt like the world was crumbling around him. He got a 70 on all of his subjects. His friends almost looked like they were making fun of him. His teacher's warm gaze suddenly seemed so very cold to him. He couldn't talk to his friends on his way back home.

He came back home and showed his mom the tests. Mom sighed. She didn't say anything else.

"How is it, mom?" he asked nervously.

Mom could only respond with a very quiet voice.

"Try harder next time. 70 is a bit low, isn't it?"

Geunseok couldn't sleep at all that night, and he failed the rest of his tests that week. 70s across the entire board. He came in 26th in the entire class. He failed completely. His entire life plan was in ruins. He couldn't even hope to go to a decent high school with these grades.

He was a loser. A failure.

That 70 should have never existed in his gradebook. Even now, he could see his parents sighing.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't get praises like this. He couldn't... get loved like this.

It was a stupid concern, he knew that. But at the time, he was very desperate. Desperate enough to want to kill himself. Because a Geunseok that couldn't get praises may as well stop existing. Right around then was when he thought of his brother.

He called his brother's former college, and through his brother's friends, he managed to contact the man. He didn't even know what to say, or what he even wanted to hear. His brother asked him what was wrong. He didn't respond, and just hung up.

He couldn't think of anything to say.

The next day, on a Saturday morning, his brother came back home.

"You're fine, you're fine," brother said, gripping his shoulders tightly.

It's fine. That's when Geunseok realized that... the only thing he ever wanted to get wasn't praises. He just wanted to hear that everything was fine. How did his brother know? He asked with tears streaming down his face.

"Your breathing just sounded so hurt over the phone. You think I'd be a brother if I didn't notice? An actor, even?"

His eyes were the exact same as 6 years ago, when he was eating instant noodles at home.

"Do you want to go watch a play?"

Geunseok nodded without hesitation. That was the first time he ever visited Hyehwa station. The streets were filled with people who had the same sort of energy as his brother. They moved like him, talked like him, and had the same eyes as him.

They were alive.

That day, Geunseok managed to find his dream. Maybe it was just a stupid dream. Maybe chasing after his brother's shadow wasn't all that great. But it was his decision to make. To keep that dream.

He would do things differently, though.

He kept studying. His grades got better again. Some way or the other, he managed to come in first in the entire school. His parents and teachers started praising him again. But this time, their praises all felt fake to him.

Then, the third year of middle school came.

Geunseok decided to attend an engineering high school. It wasn't that difficult to convince his dad. He just said that by going to an engineering school, he could have an easier time going into a better college.

He didn't say anything about acting. He knew how his dad would react if the man knew about it.

He would... probably get a slap in the face. That was fine. He'd keep on smiling regardless. Because he would be able to keep on doing what he wanted.

* * *

"Ah."

Geunseok exclaimed to himself as the club rested after their first reading session. The boy had an epiphany. Dojin stared for at him for a moment out of curiosity.

"What's up?" he asked, earning a smile from Geunseok.

"I found my reason to keep smiling after getting a slap in the face."

...What the hell was that about?

"Enough resting! Come over here!"

That was when Miso called out to the group again.