

Once Again 41

Chapter 41

"Put down your scripts."

The entire club put down their scripts. The entire auditorium quieted down right then.

"We're going to stop using our scripts from now on. You all have your lines memorized, right?"

"Yes!"

"Good."

Miso drew a rectangle on the floor with blue tape.

"This is the size of the stage you'll be working on from now on."

9 meters wide, and 7 meters tall. The eleven members of the club looked around from inside the rectangle.

"Smaller than you think, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"This is how big most small theaters are. But actually performing in it should change your thoughts drastically. You'll realize how massive it is once you actually start performing in front of a crowd. Now! Let's start again from the top. Stay focused, now. Don't try to take it too seriously, and feel free to ask for lines if you get stuck. Ok?"

"Yes ma'am."

"I won't comment too much, since this isn't for real yet. Just try to figure out how the play goes as you work in real time with other actors. Now then, Daemyung, begin."

The play began with a loud sigh.

* * *

"Hm."

Soojin smiled awkwardly, causing Maru to put down his tiger doll.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"No, it's nothing."

Her words betrayed the look of disappointment she wore.

"Please tell me. I'm trying to learn here, so anything helps."

"Well, ok. If that's the case..."

Soojin took the doll from his hand and put it on hers.

“First off, your flow of speech is perfect. Even an adult who’s never heard the story would be able to understand everything after just one go. But...”

She looked at the doll for a split second before going “rawr” with a smile on her face.

“The play isn’t for adults. A good story has value, for sure. But kids want entertainment. It’d be good if we can tell them a good story and make them have fun at the same time, but children can’t focus for too long at once. In the end, what you need is something that can grab their attention. Entertainment.”

She went “rawr” again quietly before continuing.

“You’re good at explaining things, Maru. Ah, I’m not a professional, so don’t take my words too seriously.”

“You’re certainly more professional than me.”

“I-is that so? In any case, you’re good at explaining, but it’d be better if you tried to add in some funny bits in the middle. Speaking of which...”

Soojin put the tiger doll back on Maru’s hand. She walked back down to the first floor before returning with something in her hand. It was a camcorder. A small one at that. They should be pretty expensive at this time...

“Is that yours?”

“Oh, this? Yeah. It’s from Alpha. The video quality’s good, and it has decent memory. Plus...”

Soojin closed her mouth with a smile. What an interesting lady. An early adopter trying to get a truck license...

“In any case! Can you try putting on a play with that doll?” she asked.

“By myself?”

“Yeah. I’ll take care of the other voices.”

Maru put on the doll. He decided to start from the section when the mother and daughter characters would meet the tiger on the mountain.

“Rawr.”

“Oh dear.”

“You’re fearless, aren’t you?! Coming into these mountains so late at night! Sniff, sniff, what’s this I smell? Rice cakes?”

Maru decided to just go straight to his next line. Normally, a teacher would intervene here to explain the story.

“I won’t eat you if you give me one of those.”

“H-here you go. Please let me go.”

The play started again. The tiger would eat the rice cakes, and then eat the mother as well.

“Alright, let’s stop here for now. A video should explain the situation really well. Here, take a look.”

His videotaped self was a lot more awkward than he expected from the beginning. He was just staring straight into the camera with no expression at all. Once Soojin finished saying her lines, he finally opened his mouth in the camera.

“Aha,” Maru exclaimed.

“You get it?”

“Yes.”

Maru’s pronunciations were good, and his voice acting decent as well. But his face... His face didn’t carry any emotion in it at all. Apart from his hand, the rest of his body was completely still. In short, it was just really boring to look at.

“Alright, now that you got some feedback, let’s try again pretending you have an audience this time around. Here, I’ll show you how.”

Soojin donned the mother & daughter doll on one hand, and the tiger doll on the other. She took a small breath before starting.

“Rawr!”

That roar alone was enough to make Maru realize how much better Soojin was compared to him. She was moving her entire body when she performed. She tried to become the character itself as she acted out the dolls. She roared like a tiger when the doll was supposed to roar, and she shuddered in fear when the two human dolls scrunched away as well.

That face of hers bloomed into a grin one second before morphing into fury in the next. It was pretty funny to look at. She even made a sorrowful expression when the mom got eaten by the tiger. After the short demonstration, Maru couldn’t help but clap. He realized that he was looking down on finger doll plays all this time. He was trying to get into this with the wrong mindset.

“This is a bit embarrassing when you first try this for the first time. Finger dolls can only do so much to convey emotions. In the end, I realized that I had to express things myself as well. Dolls are just symbols. Mascots. You have to be the one to convey the actual emotions. Voices aren’t enough. Just moving your body a bit here and there aren’t enough either.”

Soojin frowned deeply, saying “you have to do it like this” as she did so. She seemed to be trying to look scary, but she only looked cute doing it.

“Kids are sharper than you think. They get bored if they realize you aren’t trying hard. That’s why you need to do your best.”

She gave him back the tiger doll. Maru nodded. He realized what the woman was trying to tell him. He didn’t know if he could do it well, but he might as well try.

“Smile,” Soojin smiled toothily.

“Smile,” and Maru decided to follow suit.

He had to wonder, if a play for kids were this hard... What was an actual competition like? His mind drifted off to the other club members back at school.

Were they doing well?

* * *

"Auuuuagh," Miso said, with a strange expression.

Dojin was just looking down at the floor right in front of her.

"Abubaba?"

"....."

"Ababa, abababa. Are you trying to imitate a baby?"

"No, ma'am," Dojin responded.

"I told you to ask if you didn't know how to do it, didn't I?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"So why didn't you? Are you trying to waste time?"

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing to me? You're only hurting the club here. In any case, don't you have something to do?"

Ugh. Dojin ran outside. Ask questions if you have any... It was a great motto. A very nice way of running a club. You could always ask the other members if you happened to forget one line.

But there was a rule here. A single rule that existed to stop Dojin from asking any questions.

The rule itself was simple enough. If you forget your line, two laps around the field. If someone tells you your line, two more laps around the field. Dojin shouted annoyedly as he came out into the field.

"Ugh! Friggin' hell! What am I supposed to do?!"

"I can hear you!"

Dojin flinched when he heard Miso's voice from above. He ran the two laps as fast as he could before coming back in. The practice resumed afterwards.

He had his issues with Miso, but he couldn't help but follow her instructions regardless. They were definitely working very well.

Running cleansed him of his other thoughts. The nervousness in his body disappeared. The lines slowly returned to him as the club practiced again.

"Okay," Miso clapped her hands together.

A single round of practice without looking at the script had finished.

“We can’t just finish this with one practice round, can we?”

Dojin nodded, along with everyone else. They were pretty confident they could do better this time.

“Alright. Let’s just go at it, then. We’ll try running after one more round of this.”

Running. That is, actually putting on the play. Miso always threatened to ‘murder’ them if they made a mistake during this.

Dojin swallowed. He was the one that’s made the most mistakes in the past week. He knew what Miso was capable of when she got angry. The other club members seemed to have thought the same thing.

“Good, good. That nervousness is good. This is for real, now. Making a mistake in a run means you’ve made a mistake on the actual performance. You need to be careful. We’ll get right into it after this.”

Miso leaned back in her chair with a smile. Dojin, on the other hand, just sighed. He didn’t even want to imagine the consequences of making a mistake here.

* * *

They were crying.

One of them started first, then the other kids started crying as well. What did he do wrong? Maru looked at Soojin nervously. In the previous scene, he decided to try hard and put as much emotion as he could in showing the tiger eating the mother. He put on a big frown, shouted “roaaar!” as he bit down on the mother doll.

He thought he did pretty well. He really did. But the little girl in front of him exploded into tears.

“Ha, haha.”

Soojin laughed awkwardly before bringing out a different doll. It was a cute turtle. She walked into the crowd of crying children. Maru tried stepping in to help, but receded after the children all stepped back in fear.

“Why did you cry? Were you scared?” Soojin said, waving the turtle doll in her hand. Her voice was soothing and slow.

The crying children instantly gathered around her.

“H-he!”

“A-ate mommy!”

“Mooooommyyy...”

Maru flinched inside. He felt like he did something wrong. But since there wasn’t anything he could do to remedy the situation, he just awkwardly scratched his head.

“They must’ve been surprised. Then again, when you roared, I almost flinched as well,” the teacher next to him whispered.

Maru apologized.

“Don’t worry about it. You were just trying hard. I don’t think we can continue with you today though. The kids will cry if they see you.”

The teacher gave Maru the doll on her fingers. Maru turned to look at the kids with a conflicted look. The kids were all telling Soojin to punish the bad tiger with a crying look.

“...Come to think of it, my daughter wasn’t a fan of playing with me either.”

He recalled the time when he threw his daughter in the air to stop her from crying. His wife smacked him for that.

Of course, his daughter only cried more from that as well.

[Ugh, have some common sense!]

The voice of his wife was still ringing in his ear.

“Sorry, I’m just not very talented.”

Maru turned to head up to the second floor. The first time he tried to help out in a puppet play, he got three strikes immediately.

Chapter 42

Yoonjung stared at the green tape under her feet. Once she stepped across it, she would be on the stage. In front of her, her friends were acting in this imaginary stage.

Joonghyuk, who was acting as the main character’s father, was sitting in a steel chair. Instead of a newspaper, he was holding his script in one hand and pretending to scroll through the television channels with the other.

“Why isn’t that idiot coming back? It’s already eight,” he said casually.

As expected of him. He spoke his line flawlessly.

Minsung walked into the stage next. As the uncle of the main character, Minsung stumbled onto the stage with his hands in his gym pants.

“Jungsoo still isn’t back?” he asked.

The uncle was a jobless character. He was supposed to be the main reason why the main character rebelled in the story.

The man was just one of those characters that decided to give up on working and live with his own family. The two characters started arguing on stage for a little. Since nothing really happened in the play so far, they weren’t really being serious about it.

This cheery air in the play would soon be broken by the main character’s rebellion, an ascension to a climax, then end with the entire family talking it out with each other on the dining table.

‘Phew, I’m getting nervous,’ Yoonjung thought.

Miso was still looking pretty calm at this point.

This practice run wasn't as serious as an actual dress rehearsal, but they were still acting out the entire thing. She couldn't help but get a little nervous by this.

Around this point, as the scene was about to end, Minsung ended up making a small mistake. His tongue must've gotten twisted. That was fine. He would just need to continue from there.

But instead, Minsung spent a brief second staring at Miso nervously. The woman's eye twitched wordlessly.

Yoonjung felt her heart beat. There was no stopping this run, since it was supposed to go like a real dress rehearsal. Minsung swallowed before finishing off his line quickly. With this, the scene was finished.

Minsung and Joonghyuk stepped away from the stage. Yoonjung glanced at Minsung. The poor boy was nervously glancing at Miso.

Next scene.

Geunseok, the main character, walked into the house with Taejoon and Iseul, his friends.

'As I thought, he's good.' Yoonjung thought.

Geunseok plopped down on his chair, exhausted. He looked very natural doing it, too. Their conversation started. The scene was supposed to focus on the main character starting to feel conflicted because of his two friends.

Conflicted about traveling, that is. His friends wanted to travel to the beach in the weekend in secret. Geunseok was tempted, but he was feeling conflicted because he didn't have the money for it, and he knew his father wouldn't allow it.

"Come on, man. We don't need to get permission at our age. Let's just go."

"Yeah, come on."

Geunseok said ok for now, giving into the pressure. This much was fine. The scene ended pretty smoothly.

'The problem is me,' Yoonjung thought.

Yoonjung played Geunseok's mother. She was supposed to be a very mean, overbearing woman. One that judged children purely based on their grades. She was supposed to be one of the bigger reasons why the main character's relationship with his father worsened.

"Jungsoo," she said, crossing the green line.

The air around her changed right then. Wasn't it spring? It was supposed to be warm. But... why was it so cold around her? Was it because of Miso looking at her?

"Yes, mom," Geunseok nervously responded.

He looked like a saddened child. Good. She should be able to match him pretty well. She was a senior, after all.

“Your midterm grades this semester... Why are they this bad?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I knew it’d be like this. From the very moment I saw you slacking. All of my friends’ kids are competing on the national level, but look at you. You’re just embarrassing me.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll do better in the final.”

“Jungsoo, do you think I’m saying this to save my own face? I’m saying this for you. Alright? Look at me. Scores are everything for a person. Your happiness in the future correlates directly to your scores now.”

Yoonjung tried to look incredibly satisfied by her own words. To try to look as annoying as possible. Now, it was Geunseok’s turn. The scene would end with Geunseok acting out of character under his mother’s gaze.

Suddenly, Geunseok’s eyes changed. He jumped out of his seat and charged towards her. This was in the plan, of course. He was supposed to shout at her. It was even in the script.

They’ve practiced for it.

But... this was way too different. The boy almost looked like he was going to run into her. His eyes were full of anger. Enough anger to make Yoonjung forget about the play for a second and step back with a flinch.

Geunseok started shouting. He was doing incredibly well. Yoonjung only managed to regain her senses when Geunseok started trying to signal her with his eyes.

Ah, she almost missed her line!

“Y-you dare speak out against your mother?!”

Ah, she screwed up. She looked like a mother that was afraid of her son, not one that had control over her son.

In any case, she stepped back off the stage. With that, the lights went off, and the scene got cleaned up. This was supposed to be the point where the scene changed to the ‘marketplace’.

“Ugh, I’m so dead,” Yoonjung muttered, stepping off.

Danmi patted her back reassuringly. This would’ve helped normally, except this time it didn’t. She could feel Miso glaring at her. That lady had way too scary of a gaze.

“Hah...”

“Cheer up, she’s just going to scold you at worst.”

“...”

That’s the scary part...

* * *

Daemyung stepped on stage with Dojin. They were to lighten the mood of the play as they passed by a store.

They were also going to start a fight with the main character, as two 40 year old men going out for a drink after work. In the scene, they would run into the main character smoking with his friends out on the streets.

‘We can do this.’

Frankly, Daemyung was surprised by the skill exhibited from his first-year friends. Yurim and Soyeon played their roles perfectly as the mother’s friends. Not only that, Taejoon and Iseul seemed natural during their performance as well.

Geunseok was exemplary, as usual. The only people who needed to do well were Daemyung and Dojin now.

The two exchanged glances. One mistake here, and they were as good as dead. Dojin was the first to step towards Geunseok, scolding the other boy for smoking. Daemyung’s role acted as support for Dojin’s. But when the time came for Taejoon to respond with, “just keep going on your merry way, misters”, the boy just stood there dumbly.

After a few seconds of awkward silence,

“Ugh, please! Just leave us alone!” Iseul shouted.

She took over for Taejoon instead, causing Taejoon’s expression to change into a slight frown. “You little bitch...”

Daemyung changed the “bastard” in his line to a “bitch” instead. Iseul nonchalantly hit back with Taejoon’s line. She must’ve memorized all of the scenes by herself.

The third scene came to an end, and the other characters all left the scene, save for Geunseok. As soon as Taejoon stepped outside the green line, he turned to look at Geunseok with distress.

“Ah fuck.”

There were no better words to describe the situation for them at that moment.

* * *

Kindergarten.

After a few minutes of silence, Maru started to hear the joyous sound of laughing children again. Soojin seemed to handle everything on her own quite nicely. Maru peeked down at the first floor after playing with the finger dolls by himself for a while.

The kids were smiling again. Since they couldn’t continue with the puppet play, Soojin was playing with the kids with the dolls on her hands.

Maru couldn’t help but feel a little sorry. He messed up the entire play trying to go over the top. Soojin had explained to him that his audience would be children, too... He should’ve kept that in mind when performing.

Children are naive and oblivious. If you hid behind a door for a second then came out again, they would believe that you disappeared for a second. They understood everything at face value.

Of course, they would be frightened if Maru roared loudly like that. He just completely ignored what would be considered appropriate and went with it.

Despite Soojin's efforts, she was clearly having trouble handling 50 kids all at once. The teacher offered little relief, since the kids were just going straight for Soojin since she had the dolls.

Maru watched this for a second before looking back at the second floor. He remembered seeing something there a while ago...

There it was. In the corner of the floor was a fox mask. He put it on and stepped downstairs. Soojin smiled lightly as soon as she saw him and pointed.

"Look, there's a bad fox over there."

"Bad fox?"

The kids immediately responded.

"Mr. Fox is trying to hurt big sis Soojin. Big sis doesn't like owies."

From Maru's perspective, it almost looked like Soojin was a kid herself. She really had a knack for being a kindergarten teacher. He had to wonder at this point what her real job was.

"Waaah!"

"Bad Mr. Fox!"

Soojin pointed at Maru with a snuffle. The kids all ran towards him, grabbed his pants, and started shaking.

"Don't hurt her!"

"Bad Mr. Fox! Bad Mr. Fox!"

"Yah! Yah!"

These little twerps had a ridiculous amount of strength in their little bodies. Maru slowly made his way back to the room where the kids came from. He could play here, but the staircase behind him could be dangerous.

That was rule one of acting. Part of its purpose was self-satisfaction, but ultimately, it was a show for the audience. The audience here were the kids, and therefore, Maru would have to put them in the proper environment, for the most amount of entertainment.

"Mr. Fox is here to hurt. Fox! Fox!" Maru said.

He waded through the crowd of kids with a light voice. He couldn't remember what foxes sounded like, so he just said "fox fox", but the kids seemed to enjoy that even more.

"Why would a fox go fox fox? Hehehe."

“Then what does the fox say?”

“Eh? I don’t know.”

“Let’s just say it says fox fox then.”

Maru picked up the talking kid and shook the boy lightly. The kid seemed nervous for a second, but immediately burst into laughter.

“Me too! Me too!”

“Me tooo!”

The kids crowded all over him, completely forgetting that he was supposed to be a bad fox. Maru turned to look at Soojin through his mask. The woman was giving him a big thumbs up with a smile.

* * *

“Do you really want to go play with your friends that much?”

“No, I don’t.”

“If you really want to, just go. Make sure to call every day though.”

“...Dad.”

Joonghyuk stood up from his seat and left the stage. Yoonjung, the mother, looked at Geunseok coldly before leaving herself. Geunseok gripped the spoon in his hand tightly for a second, before standing up with a sigh.

With that, the play was over. The actors came in one by one through the green line to prepare for the curtain call. The side characters were the first to bow to the audience. Once everyone else was done, Geunseok would take his place in the center.

The eleven actors grabbed each other’s hands, standing side by side, and bowed. With that, the run was over.

“What a shitshow,” Miso blurted, “a total shitshow.”

“.....”

“I knew things would be like this when you never bothered to do anything more than reading the damn script. Do you only practice when I’m around?”

No one could answer that. Of course, they all practiced in their own time and of course, they tried to read the script whenever they could. But at this point, anything they say would come off as nothing but excuses.

Yoonjung looked over at the kids next to her. They were all sighing dejectedly.

“Second years,” Miso called out.

“Yes!”

Yoonjung and Minsung were the loudest of the group. Probably because they were the ones that made the mistakes.

“You guys were average. Perfectly average. Is that enough for you, though? You guys did even worse than the first years.”

Miso glared.

Yoonjung didn't dare look up. She completely fumbled on stage.

“Lee Yoonjung!”

“Yes!”

“Does it make sense for Jungsoo's mom to flinch like that in front of her son?”

“No.”

“Oh, so you knew that, but you still thought it would be a good idea to flinch? Unless... don't tell me that you were intimidated by a first year?”

“.....”

“You have to get into character. You need to become an embittered woman that only thinks of her son as an advertisement for herself. You get it?”

“Yes.”

“You're only good at responding quickly, aren't you?”

Miso turned.

“Minsung.”

“Yes.”

“Were your lines gum or something? You were chewing on it on stage for some time.”

“I'm sorry.”

“You think you'll be able to apologize to the audience if you make the same mistake?”

She clicked her tongue afterwards. When Yoonjung glanced sideways, she noticed Minsung gritting his teeth.

Miso turned to look at the first years.

“Daemyung.”

“Yes.”

Daemyung responded nervously. Yoonjung recalled seeing the boy carry on the play pretty well with Iseul before.

“Good job. The worst thing that can happen during a play is for the audience to realize that the actor made a mistake. It’s also the most embarrassing thing for an actor to experience. You did well though. Iseul, you too. You need to step in immediately the moment you notice the idiot next to you makes a mistake. Never let the play come to a pause. Always remember, the show must go on. Understood?”

“Yes!”

“Alright, we’re going to get dinner before doing this again. I’m going light on you guys since this was your first run. But be prepared to be scolded a lot if you make a mistake next time.”

Miso’s eyes narrowed as she scanned the club.

Yoonjung avoided the woman’s gaze. Honestly, this teacher was so scary...

Chapter 43

It was June. The impatient students were already going to school in T-shirts - one of the positives of not having uniforms. Since Maru didn’t get cold very easily, he decided to wear a T-shirt himself.

He rode his bike with earphones. The scenery swooshed by him rapidly. He could see a kid walking by while holding his mother’s hand in the morning sun. He was wearing a yellow bag with a little yellow hat. They must be going to kindergarten.

‘Come to think of it, why use yellow all the time?’

Before he knew it, he had reached school. He got off his bike and walked past the disciplinary teacher casually. The man smiled at him, looking at his short hair.

Maru never really cared for hairstyles, always opting for the short sporty ones. As he parked his bike, he noticed Dowook doing the same as well.

“Nice bike as always,” he called out.

“Go buy one yourself, then.”

Dowook turned around with a little smile. The boy would’ve ignored Maru in the past, but at this point they were finally starting to exchange greetings. After that incident, Dowook had stopped being a delinquent altogether. He seemed to be melding in with the rest of his class pretty well, too.

Of course, he was still going back home alone.

Maru walked into the class and threw his bag onto his desk. Dojin shot him a tired greeting from his desk.

“Mor...ning.”

“Why do you look so spent on such a joyous Friday morning?”

“...Practice sapped me yesterday. I came back home at eleven last night. I dreamed of instructor Miso swearing at me.”

Dojin shivered, revealing a dark pair of eyebags.

“Two days left, huh,” Maru commented.

“One, actually. If you count today.”

“Come on, the day hasn’t even started. How are you guys, by the way? Doing well I hope?”

It was three weeks ago when he heard of them doing their first run. That was the beginning of May. The time when he first visited the kindergarten with Soojin.

He knew that the club was doing actual dress rehearsals at this point. With all the props and costumes and everything. They even visited the actual auditorium where they’d be performing. According to Dojin, the place was “disgustingly big”.

It was a vast space with 500 seats. Of course it would be intimidating to the kids.

“Perfect? Hehehe, perfect...”

Dojin seemed to be bordering insanity at this point. Maru spent some time watching the club during their practice sessions. For sure, the club members had changed. Firstly, they were all strictly off-book, with the exception of Miso.

Maru watched one of their runs before. Everything from the start to finish was flawless. Good enough to make him almost clap subconsciously. They must’ve been trying hard.

After the run, the club members would immediately group together to critique each other’s work. Miso only intervened when they got stuck on something.

‘So the practice they do after I leave was the real thing.’

The actual dress rehearsal probably began after 5pm. Of course, he didn’t actually know if this was the case. He could only hazard a guess from looking at Dojin’s current state.

“O-oh, morning.”

Daemyung stumbled over to the two of them from the front of the class.

“Hey, what’s up with the two of you looking so tired? You guys are performing in just two days.”

Maru pressed his friends’ shoulders lightly with a reassuring face.

“Right. Two days.”

“We’re gonna work our asses off.”

“You sounded pretty damn tired when you said your lines yesterday.”

“No you.”

The two of them looked at each other for a second before sighing and taking out their scripts.

“Should we do some reading?”

“Guess we have to.”

Maru’s two friends started analyzing the script that they’ve studied all these months.

“Work hard.”

Maru left them to it. He was busy with his own stuff as well. While the club was busy practicing for the competition, Maru’s time was spent on helping Soojin run her puppet plays.

He actually got a call from her early in the morning yesterday. It would seem that she received word that it was a school holiday. She immediately asked him where he lived when he dazedly said he would help.

As he looked at the time after ending the call, the doorbell rang. Soojin was here before he knew it. Right then, he could catch a glimpse of Miso’s expression.

She was starting to resemble her friend.

Maru left a note on the table and left with the woman. They were headed to an orphanage. According to her, they didn’t have any other time to do it since the orphanage was closing soon.

They arrived barely in time in Daejeon. The first thing Soojin did was hug the principal of the orphanage and cry together. They seem well acquainted with each other. Maru just watched the two of them awkwardly.

Preparations were quick to start, as Maru realized why they came here in a small van instead of the usual car. An incredible amount of toys and dolls were stored in the trunk, along with clothes and food. That did make him wonder.

Just what was Soojin’s day job?

“Me? I do a bunch of things. Hehe.”

Hehe? How was he supposed to connect that laugh with all that money of hers? In the end, he just gave up on thinking about it. She was probably born with a silver spoon in her mouth.

The orphanage took care of kids under 7 years of age. They had teenagers in the past, but after coming under hard times, they had to start sending the children away to other places. It was quite a bitter story.

“We don’t even call this place an orphanage anymore. It’s just daycare.”

The middle-aged principal smiled sorrowfully as she touched upon the rusty doors. Soojin said she wanted to give the children here their last memories before the orphanage closed down for good. It was a small forgettable event for the children, but hopefully it could make the moving experience a little bit better for them.

Soojin really was the definition of a selfless person. The show began after the three of them moved all the gifts inside. The moment Soojin entered the building, the children shouted ‘wah!’ with joy.

The lady was popular just about anywhere. Popular amongst children and adults alike. Then again, who could hate such a hard-working, cheerful lady like her?

Maru ended up working incredibly hard that morning. Before he knew it, it was already noon. He gave each of the 37 children in the orphanage their personalized gifts. Each of the boxes even included a message from Soojin. He couldn’t even imagine how much work that must’ve taken. The boxes were all even individually wrapped, with each of the gifts catered towards each child.

“They’re probably going through really hard times, having to start over and all. I want to give them a good memory they can reference in those times. Hopefully, they can look back to this moment and think ‘life was good’ at some point. Then again, they might not even remember this at all.”

Maru could easily feel how much Soojin loved each child. She knew each of the 37 kids by name. She must’ve had some special memories attached to this place.

“This was actually my home,” she said, seemingly reading his mind.

Ah. Maru never would’ve guessed from her personality and usual demeanor. She just seemed like the type of person who’s never gone through any hardship in her life. Soojin took this as a chance to speak a little bit more about herself.

“I met my parents when I was just about your age. They were good people. They scolded me when I deserved to be scolded, and they hugged me when I really needed it. They changed my perspective of hating my birth parents to being able to forgive them. That’s when I realized that I wanted to be like them. Even though they’re both far better people than I could ever be.”

Maru realized that was why Soojin’s smiles never once seemed light to him. Under those smiles were a lot of past hardships. She managed to overcome her pains and changed herself. Her adopted parents probably helped a lot in the process, but she was ultimately able to change because of herself.

Maru stopped himself from saying ‘that’s amazing’. That didn’t seem like quite the fitting reaction. He didn’t want to judge all of her life with just a few words. So he just decided not to say anything.

In the afternoon, they held a barbeque party in the backyard of the orphanage. There were enough meat and vegetables to feed 30 adult men. The kids all laughed and talked as they ate the meat Soojin grilled for them.

“Tiring, isn’t it?” Soojin asked.

“Yes, it really is.”

“Pft. That’s what I like about you, Maru. You’re very honest and direct about everything.”

“I’m good at lying. I just know when to lie and when not to.”

7 pm. By then, everything was cleaned up and the kids were all sleeping together in their rooms.

“Thank you for everything.”

“No, thank you for everything.”

The day at the orphanage ended as it began, with the principal hugging Soojin. The two of them made their way back up to Suwon in a hurry.

When they came back home, Soojin gave Maru a white envelope. Maru refused immediately. He didn’t want to get paid for something like this.

He did it because he wanted to. Plus, he learned a lot from doing this as well. He was able to learn the basics of plays from this. As a matter of fact, this was the type of stuff you would normally pay to learn.

But Soojin was stubborn. She tried to hand him the envelope even as he was getting out of the car. She even said she wouldn't go home if he didn't take it.

"I was the one who made you work without any prior notice. So I should obviously pay you for it. This is the rule for adults. You're an adult too, right Maru?"

She sounded like she was trying to console a child. Maru had to give in with that. He took the envelope, telling her he would use it well. He waved her off and walked back into the house.

Of course, his mother tried to ask him just where in the world he was all day. Instead of giving her a proper response, he just gave her the envelope.

He thought there would be 30,000 won in there at best, but there turned out to be a whopping 150,000 won in there instead.

"What in the world did you do?" mom asked.

"...Work?"

All that was just yesterday. Maru was also understandably tired this morning.

* * *

Several minutes before their 5th class began, the advisor for the acting club came to call on the three of them.

Maru, Dojin, and Daemyung followed Taesik up to the auditorium.

"I never thought I'd rather be studying instead of doing this."

"Me too. Thinking of looking at instructor Miso is just..."

The school must've given them permission to skip class since the preliminaries were just two days away. Taesik told the three of them 'work hard, all of you', and Maru's two friends nodded in response.

Everyone else was already gathered in the auditorium, including Miso. Even Soojin was there, along with an unfamiliar man.

"Hey, Maru," Soojin waved.

Thanks to her, he got the attention of the entire club. Maru waved back awkwardly with a smile.

"What the, you know that lady?" Dojin asked, nudging him from the side.

Maru just said he kind of knew her and walked over to the rest of the club.

"Maru, you come this way," Miso pointed at the man next to Soojin.

The man was just around 175cm in height. Similar to Maru's height now. He had a decent frame, with a very well defined face.

Then there were his eyes.

Playful, yet focused eyes immediately told Maru that this person was someone special.

“We meet again,” the man said.

Again?

Maru had heard that voice before. Back then at the...

“Ah, you were at the Blue Sky theater...”

“So you remember. Nice to meet you. I’m the big brother of Geunseok over there, Hong Geunsoo,” the man grinned.

Maru’s jaw dropped a little bit. He definitely remembered this person. The star of the future. This was the person who starred in 5 movies that raked in 10 million views each. A person who single handedly carried the movie industry even at the age of 50. Memories from the past started flowing out once his identity was established.

‘That’s right, I was listening to this person’s radio as I drove the bus.’

But that didn’t last long. His memories immediately faded and disappeared. But he was still able to remember what the man looked like at the age of 50. A very handsome gentleman who exuded a noble aura.

“What, surprised that I’m so handsome?” Geunsoo asked, after noticing Maru’s stare.

“So this is what you were like around now.”

“What?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

So the actor, famous for his serious roles, was actually quite a lighthearted person in the past.

“Now then! Let’s begin.”

Miso grabbed everyone’s attention with a clap. The air in the room suddenly grew tense.

“We only have a few dress rehearsals left. Let’s make this perfect.”

“Yes!”

The club members started moving with a confident response.

Chapter 44

The club members all lined up after getting in their costumes. They had some makeup on them as well.

“We’re going to have twice the amount of makeup, now that we are going on stage. We do this to give volume to our face, since the lighting usually makes our face look flat. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“This time, we’re going to complete the sets for each scene as well. Don’t forget where you’re supposed to go. Don’t try to rush things when you take out props either. We have plenty of time, so just think about doing it perfectly more than anything.”

The club members nodded tensely. They all looked quite different once they had their actual costumes on.

Geunseok, Taejoon and Iseul had their high school uniforms on, but all the other kids were wearing all sorts of clothes portraying various age groups.

Dojin and Daemyung, for instance, were wearing suits. Gray and black striped suits. They didn't look so bad in it, surprisingly.

Awkward, though? Sure.

The second years looked very different as well. Yoonjung had a wig on her that looked very expensive, considering how natural it looked.

Joonghyuk was wearing a white button-up shirt with dark blue dress pants. He even had a little mustache drawn on his face.

Minsung was wearing very loose gym clothes. His turtleneck really completed the jobless look.

Danmi played a shopkeeper. She wore a strangely-colored pair of pants with a white shirt and a jacket on top. Her lips were painted purple to resemble the appearance of a talkative neighborhood lady.

"Daemyung," Miso called out.

"Loosen up your necktie a little bit. You guys just got out of work. You're walking over to get a drink. Show that you've loosened up significantly."

Daemyung pulled his tie down a little bit, earning a nod from Miso.

"Yurim."

"Yes."

Yurim stepped forward. She too was playing a middle aged lady like Yoonjung and Soyeon.

"Remember this well. You guys are friends of Jungsoo's mothers, and you live better than her. You guys call yourselves friends, but you only associate with Jungsoo's mother to look down on the woman. You can be a little toxic if you'd like. Just look down on her. Soyeon, you too. The more you girls pressure Jungsoo's mother, the more your characters come alive. You get it?"

"Yes."

Yurim and Soyeon nodded nervously. During the past few months, Yurim gave herself a little curl to her hair, giving her a mature look. Soyeon too, attempted the mature look, by losing an incredible amount of weight.

Surprisingly, the girl was dissatisfied about her current weight, as Maru often heard her talking about eating as much as she wants after the plays.

"By the way, the people over here are friends during my year in the club. The first generation of Blue Sky. This is Hong Geunsoo, and this is Kang Soojin. Don't disappoint them, now."

Maru gave Soojin a little glance. He didn't know she was a member of this club too.

“Maru, you watch the play carefully. You’re going to be the audience today. Give the kids an honest review.”

Maru went to sit down next to the seniors. Watching the club members from the audience felt fresh to him. So this was what Miso saw. He could feel the energetic gaze from each of the club members. The energy exuding out of them was extraordinary.

‘Being an instructor must be pretty hard.’

The energy from all eleven of the students was, quite frankly, overwhelming. He had no idea how Miso managed to even dare act as she did under all those gazes.

“Your friends are pretty good,” Geunsoo mentioned.

The man’s social skills were incredible. Whereas his brother, Geunseok seemed pretty difficult to approach, Geunsoo seemed incredibly easy to befriend despite the age gap.

“So why are you here and not on the stage anyway?”

“I hesitated.” “Hesitated? To do acting?”

“Yes. I still am, actually.”

“Hesitation... It’s a good thing to have. If you aren’t passionate about something, you might as well think before you act. Lots of adults demand that kids your age be reckless, but I think differently.”

Maru looked up at Geunsoo. This was a man who’d succeed big time with acting in the future. He couldn’t very well take the man’s words lightly.

Right then, Miso called the kids over with a clap.

“We’ll begin in exactly ten minutes. Treat this as the real thing. Think before you act, think before you walk, and think before you even breathe. This is your last test, so be very careful.”

The floor became awkward for a split second. Maru continued talking to Geunsoo.

“How did you get into acting?”

“Me? Hmm...”

Geunsoo looked up at the ceiling as he started thinking.

“Do you want to know what this guy’s nickname was in high school?” Soojin butted.

“What was it?”

“Lunatic.”

“What?”

A lunatic?

Geunsoo smiled, muttering ‘that’s a nostalgic nickname’ to himself.

“There really wasn’t a better name for him at the time. He just went straight to Mr. Taesik and just asked to make the acting club. In that sense, that teacher was quite amazing as well. They just made the club right then and there. The two of them got along real well, which only made things difficult for everyone.”

Soojin smiled, thinking back at the time.

“Geunsoo would always say this at the time if you saw him: ‘Do you want to try acting?’ He was incredibly persistent, too. His entire class had to endure this for a month straight.”

“Hey, I wasn’t that bad,” Geunsoo complained.

Miso butted in immediately.

“Soojin actually toned it down. He was even worse than that. He’d just scream every single day from the class podium going, ‘let’s burn our youths away with passion!’ Thought I was going to become flipping deaf.”

“To think the very first member of the club would say this to me... I feel hurt, you know?”

Geunsoo lightly smacked Miso’s shoulder, earning an awkward smile from her.

Well, that was quite a sight. Maru never imagined that anyone could shut Miso up.

“In any case, that’s how the club was made in the beginning. To be honest, I... really didn’t want to join at first. You remember what kind of a situation I was in, right?”

Soojin had told him that she was adopted in the beginning of high school. She probably didn’t want to join any club with such a heavy heart.

“But Geunsoo would just ask me again and again and again. I thought he had short-term memory loss when I first saw him. Really, he was just a complete lunatic,” she continued.

It felt incredibly alienating hearing the word ‘lunatic’ come out of Soojin’s mouth so many times. It was strangely cute, though, for some reason.

“So, did you get into the club in the end?”

“Yeah. But I wasn’t forced in or anything. I just realized I stopped thinking about my home or my life or anything else when I was arguing with Geunsoo. I mean, you must’ve experienced it too. When you focus on something, you can’t think of anything else. That’s when Geunsoo really convinced me.”

“What did he do?”

“He told me he’d make me smile for the next three years, as long as I was in the club. That really got me for some reason.”

Maru glanced at Geunsoo, who just shrugged in response.

“She looks very pure and happy now, but back then she was a real piece of work. There was rain around her face all day long.”

Geunsoo gestured rain falling with his fingers over his head. Soojin’s face immediately flushed red.

“You wanted to know why I started acting, right? It isn’t anything special. It started as a rebellion against my father. But that just disappeared after a while. The real reason why I got into acting was because I enjoyed it. As soon as I realized how fun it was, I couldn’t give it up. I started going into it with the mindset, ‘I’ll do it even if I have to die!’”

Even if he had to die, huh. That one sentence seemed to describe Geunsoo’s thoughts pretty well. Maru took a look at the first gen members carefully. Each one of them had a very strongly defined personality.

Miso and Geunsoo made acting their jobs, while Soojin turned it into volunteer work.

“You were doing puppet plays with Soojin, right?” Geunsoo asked.

“Yes.”

“How was it?”

“It... was fun. Pretty satisfying, too.”

“Was it?”

“Yes.”

“Hm, I see. Anything else?”

“Anything else?”

Maru shook his head. He was satisfied with just this for now. Geunsoo put on a strange smile in response.

“Yo, smiley,” he said, turning to Miso.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t think this kid will go really deep into acting.”

Geunsoo looked at Maru with a hand on his chin. He had a small smile on his face.

“It’s fun and satisfying, right?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good enough, then. I like to think of acting as a greedy monster with a very particular eye for things. Acting chooses people, rather than the contrary. Some people are born to become actors, while others just aren’t. And if a person is unfortunate enough to be the former... Acting just swallows those people up completely. That’s how the ghosts of Hyehwa station come to be. They’ve been devoured by the monster.”

Geunsoo scanned Maru with a sharp look before continuing.

“I don’t know what’s making you hesitate, but I recommend that you don’t think too much. If acting takes a liking to you, you’ll be taken up by it no matter what you do. If it doesn’t, you’ll never be able to make it onto the stage.”

Tap.

Geunsoo pat Maru's back lightly.

"Oh, and lastly. You said you were feeling satisfied, right? That's completely fine. But people who are taken by acting feel something completely different. They feel excitement."

Geunsoo gestured towards the club members with his chin. Now that Maru looked, he noticed a flaring energy of excitement and passion coming off of the members.

"The kids this time around are all amazing people," Geunsoo said, furrowing his brows.

That's when Maru noticed.

The man's face was starting to flare up with excitement like the other kids.

* * *

As soon as Maru excused himself to the bathroom, Miso slapped Geunsoo's back as hard as she could.

Slap!

The club members looked at Miso and Geunsoo with surprised faces.

"Don't worry about it. Focus."

"Yes."

Geunsoo asked Soojin to rub his back with a pained face. Soojin rubbed Geunsoo's back with a slight grin on her face.

"I ask you to make the boy care about acting, and you just go trample on him, huh?" Miso growled.

The main reason why she called him here today was to check on the club as a whole, but she also wanted him to nudge Maru's interests towards acting as well. But instead of saying any words of help to the boy, he just blew out the candle completely.

"And Ms. Soojin?"

"Y-yeah?"

"I asked you to help Maru become interested in puppet plays, not become interested in playing around with children. You've just turned him into a volunteer worker, haven't you?"

"No, I..."

"Oh my god, you idiots."

Miso shook her head with her arms crossed. This was bad. Maru's eyes just now... She could just see him drawing the line with the club again. At this rate, the boy would just end up interested in volunteering, not acting.

That was no bueno.

"Why are you so obsessed over him anyway?" Geunsoo asked.

“He makes me insanely curious. He’s going to show me something if I train him well and put him on stage. That’s what my guts tell me anyway.”

“Well, I’m not doubting your judgement, but...”

Geunsoo leaned back with his legs stretched out forward.

“The way I see it, he’s not the type to do something because someone else tells him to. He’s very centered. He really has to have an interest in it himself if he wants to try something. If you force him to act, sure, he’ll do it, but he won’t be committed.”

“I know. That’s why I’ve been slowly tempting him. And then you do this?”

Geunsoo was right. Maru, unlike other kids his age, was actually thinking of his future.

Safety first.

There was no better phrase that described the boy than this. To Miso, Maru was a very tempting subject. The boy was somehow fundamentally different from everyone else. That was the judgment Miso came up with after two months she spent with him. She was crazy curious to see what the boy would be like if he actually took up acting.

“Well, you’re reckless as usual.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, you goddamned lunatic.”

“Oh, so scary.”

Miso sighed exasperatedly.

Chapter 45

At that time, Maru was taking a look at himself through the bathroom mirror.

[But people who are taken by acting feel something completely different. They feel excitement.]

Geunsoo’s words just reverberated all over his head.

Excitement, huh.

Maru put a hand over his chest. It was beating calmly. Just quietly doing its job dutifully.

“Excitement.”

He thought back for a second. Did anything excite him back in high school?

“Basketball, video games... And occasionally good test scores. When I got my allowance?”

For sure, those things did get him pretty fired up in the moment. Winning a game of basketball for a single can of soda felt exhilarating, and getting a rare drop from a boss felt incredibly fulfilling.

Those were the things that used to excite him.

But now? There was nothing. It almost felt like he grew numb to any kind of emotion. Even today, the Maru of the mirror was making a calm, uninterested face. What kind of expressions did his previous high school self make?

It'd come to a point where he has to practice smiling every once in a while. Time really hasn't done Maru any favors.

After staring for a few seconds more, Maru stepped away. It was time to go back. The dress rehearsal would start soon. As a matter of fact, Miso signalled the club to start as soon as Maru got back to his seat.

"The audience goes silent. The lights turn on, and the sounds of the television start playing."

Miso turned on the TV noises through the speaker. At the same time, Joonghyuk sat down on the sofa, and Minsung walked into the scene. The first act had begun.

* * *

As more time passed, the tension between the characters started rising faster and faster. Soon, the entire first year cast was in front of the corner store.

Daemyung stepped into the scene with his loosened tie. He walked next to the shop, and found a student smoking in the corner.

The group began talking.

Taejoon was the first to burst out, an incredible annoyance written all over his face. Dojin was next, rearing forward with a similar expression. It was clear to see they practiced quite a bit.

The flow of the conversation was natural. Plus, Daemyung really did seem like a carefree salaryman right then. He tried to stop Dojin from getting into a fight before exploding himself when the students targeted him.

Really, the boy looked like any other 50 year old you'd find on the street.

"He's good," Geunsoo whispered.

Maru couldn't help but agree. Daemyung was surprisingly good at this.

'But Geunseok is the one that's really standing out.'

If Daemyung's acting was good enough to make you nod in satisfaction, Geunseok's acting was good enough to make you forget about the play. The boy looked at the audience every once in a while as he spoke. He seemed to have studied that in his own time.

And then, his monologue began.

The auditorium became silent as the boy started speaking. His voice was small, but by no means was it quiet.

"Hmm."

Maru glanced at Geunsoo. The man was looking at his brother with a very satisfied smile. He seemed to have taken a liking to his brother's acting.

But at the same time, there was also a bit of a nervous air about the man. Why?

* * *

The family on stage came together once more after ending the feud between them. The mother still finds her son dissatisfactory, but she can't yell at the boy anymore. The father gives his permission, and the boy finishes the final act with a small monologue. The play comes to an end as the white noise of the TV becomes louder.

Then, the characters return on stage one by one in a curtain call. Geunsoo comes out in the end, finishing their bows to the audience.

Clap clap clap.

Soojin and Maru clapped. It was clear as day that the club worked incredibly hard during the past two months. The actors looked at Miso with a very big sigh.

Miso hesitated a little before starting to clap herself.

"Make sure to do a little bit better than this on the actual thing. You should have a solid chance of getting an award if you do."

"Phew."

The first and second years sighed loudly. They looked at each other with a fulfilled expression.

"Good job."

"Good work."

"Thank you all for your hard work."

Maru put a hand over his chest as he watched the club members talk to each other. The temperature of the entire room seemed to go up for a second, but... his heart was beating the same as before.

"They're good, weren't they?" Geunsoo asked.

"Yes. They're very different compared to their previous practices."

"First time seeing their dress rehearsal?"

"Yes. They look very fitting in their roles."

Geunsoo nodded.

"Yeah. That was a pretty good play. By the way, that suit over there... That's something I brought over ten years ago."

Geunsoo smiled as he pointed at Daemyung's suit.

“My uncle ran a shop in the neighborhood. I worked my ass off there so that I could get myself a suit. I don’t regret working that hard for it, since it’s obviously still being used very well. Those dress shoes were from me as well.”

“You must’ve worked very hard for the club.”

“I didn’t attend school for three years. I attended the club for three years. I got beat up by both my teachers and parents for messing up on my tests, but what could I do? I couldn’t help but care more about the club.”

“Did you ever regret it?”

“Regret it? Well, I might’ve... I can’t remember. My brain doesn’t want to waste its space storing useless memories like those.”

Geunsoo clicked his tongue lightly. It was pretty remarkable looking at someone so focused on a single passion.

“I was pretty insane.”

Geunsoo grinned. He looked like he had seen straight through Maru.

“I couldn’t see anything else back in those days, since I was so taken by acting. Didn’t even care about college entrance exams either.”

“You can do that?”

“Surprisingly easy if you try.”

The man probably wasn’t called a lunatic for nothing.

Kids have quite a lot of worries to think about. Of course, these worries weren’t very light in comparison to what adults had to worry about.

A child whose toy just broke.

A student who forgot about homework.

A student who slept late for his college entrance exams.

A person who got into a big fight with his interviewer at a job interview.

A salaryman who got scolded by his boss.

A wife whose husband had been cheating on.

No one could possibly weigh or judge these people’s pains. Of course, some people who’ve actually experienced these things could say it was pointless trying to compare a broken toy with a dead person.

But to a child, that broken toy might be as valuable as an actual person. Their pain isn’t something an adult could understand. To a child, the toy might’ve been their entire world.

Giving up on studying to focus completely on acting for three years... It couldn't have been an easy decision. Geunsoo must've had to muster up an incredible amount of courage to actually go through with it.

Geunsoo stated that he started acting to rebel against his father. That probably meant that he didn't have a very good standing in the house.

To a student, school was half of their life, with family being the other. The only thing both of those groups ever wanted out of that student was to study. Geunsoo stepped on those expectations and jumped right into acting.

That... didn't just take courage. It required the person to be a madman.

"That doesn't sound easy at all."

"Of course not. You haven't actually experienced it."

"You're telling me that the decision's actually easy to make when the time comes to make it?"

"No. I told you already. If the monster of acting has his eyes on you, you don't have a choice anymore."

"So acting is something you have to be born with?"

"That's what I think. Of course, you'll have to voluntarily go into the room that the monster lives in first. But it's up to the monster to actually welcome you in. Working hard is important, sure. But not all people are born equal. It's like how I can never hope to become Michael Jordan no matter how hard I try."

"Talent... huh."

"You probably caught on a little already."

Geunsoo gestured towards the exit as he turned to Miso.

"I'll go out for a bit. You guys aren't practicing right away, right?"

"We'll rest for a bit."

"Good, good. I'll be borrowing this kid, then."

Geunsoo put his arm around Maru. Maru looked at Miso, who just nodded silently.

"Let's go."

Geunsoo started dragging Maru towards the exit. But right before stepping out, he stopped himself with a small "oops" and walked towards Geunseok.

Geunseok seemed oddly nervous. Surprising.

"Good job," Geunsoo said. He turned around after giving his little brother a few pats on the back.

It wasn't very hard to notice the boy's lips turn upwards in response.

"I heard the rooftop is open. Let's go there."

"It looks like both you and the instructor like going to the rooftop for conversations, huh?"

"I mean, that place was our home base. The acting club's home base. We practiced a ton there. We had the keys to the place, actually."

"Aha."

Geunsoo looked around for a second after opening the rooftop door.

"It's the same as ever, huh," he commented.

"It's concrete, after all."

"Can't you at least try to be emotional?"

Geunseok waved Maru over to the balance beam next to the railings. The thing had rotted to the point of almost collapsing.

"Daaang, this didn't go anywhere either. We put this here to use as a chair."

"I see."

"Wow! Nothing changed at all here!"

"You didn't come here for a while, I see."

"Me? It's been a full decade."

"You didn't come here after graduating at all?"

"Why would I? The only reason why I would ever come here is to see big bro Taesik, but I see that dude outside the school all the time."

Maru nodded. The man seemed incredibly free to him. Unbound like the wind. Unlike a leaf that follows wherever the wind goes, but the wind itself, free to choose where it wants to go.

"I don't actually like to say this kind of stuff to kids, but I'll tell you this since you seem to be pretty centered. I didn't live that long, but from my experience... No one is born equal."

"No one's born equal?"

"Yeah. You can even look at a person's physique to decide. Tall people, short people. Handsome people, ugly people. Rich people, poor people. No matter how much society tries to make people equal, there's a very clear class divide no matter where you look."

Maru nodded. This much was somewhat agreeable. It was the reason why he decided to give up on corporate life after 45 years. He couldn't take it after seeing his junior receive a promotion faster than him. Especially when he clearly did more work than his junior.

'I was innocent.'

He had no idea why this was the case back then. But he realized later on that this junior was the president's son. In the end, nepotism was better than actual results.

“People are never equal. That’s why they all have different talents they’re good at.”

Geunsoo looked down at the field below. Maru took a look down as well.

“That kid over there might be talented at soccer. That kid playing basketball might actually be a table tennis genius. That kid sitting over there might be the future Shaquille O’Neal.”

Geunsoo continued talking as he stretched his arms a bit.

“But no one knows what kind of talent they have. Schools are built so that they can learn about their talents, but... you should know better than me that they usually hurt more than they help.”

Geunsoo started walking.

“Elementary school is, well... there for elementary education. Then middle school. Middle school’s there so you can start getting an idea of what you’re good at. At least, that’s the purpose of schools that the government always talks about, but in reality? You’re just being pushed into a chicken coop to study all day. How are you supposed to find your talents in the meantime? It’s hard. Incredibly difficult. But sometimes, the crazies still manage to stand out from the crowd. Like me, for example. Oh, this is a self-complement, if you couldn’t tell. Anyways, if you think about it, the crazies are the ones to really learn from school.”

Geunsoo grinned. For sure, the man had thought much about school. Miso definitely wasn’t lying about intelligence being necessary in becoming an actor.

“Han Maru, was it?”

“Yes.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Me?”

What did Maru want to do? He decided to answer honestly.

“I want to find a job that can feed my family without worries.”

Geunsoo snapped his fingers in understanding.

“So that’s the reason why you’re hesitating. I get it now.”

“Do you have any advice?”

“Nope, not at all.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t think I’m in a position to say things about someone else’s life. The only thing I can do is try to drag other people into acting. Just as I did 13 years ago. But you’re already in the acting club, so there’s nothing more that I can do.”

Geunsoo walked back to the door.

“Keep thinking. Keep hesitating, and then make your decision. You’re still going to regret it in the end, but that’s just life.”

Chapter 46

You’re still going to regret it, but that’s just life.

“Yo, head.”

“Yes?”

“Why are you so dazed?”

“I’ve been thinking.”

“You think too much.”

Miso threw him a drink. The club members went through two more runs after Maru talked with Geunsoo at the rooftop. They didn’t make a single mistake in either of them. Confidence was starting to appear in their voices, and they struggled less in their blocking.

One step closer to perfection.

After the two runs ended, it was time for dinner. Geunsoo and Soojin decided to treat the entire club out to a meat buffet. The students sucked in meat almost like a vacuum.

Maru was busy cooking meat up for his friends, which disappeared almost as soon as it was cooked. Miso crept up next to him, curious about what happened between him and Geunsoo at the rooftop.

“What did Geunsoo tell you?”

“He told me to keep thinking and hesitating. But he also told me I’m going to regret it anyways.”

“That lunatic is saying some dumb stuff again.”

Miso clicked her tongue in annoyance. When Maru stared back, Miso turned away dismissing it as nothing.

Maru could see the club members behind Miso. Though they were all happily eating the meat on their plate, there was a small air of nervousness among them.

“Don’t take his words too seriously. He’s a complete lunatic. He doesn’t think like us normal people at all.”

“You don’t seem very normal though, instructor?”

“Again with your argumentativeness. Can’t you just say ‘yes’ once? Are you going through puberty or something?”

“Who knows. Maybe I’m going for a second round?”

“What?”

“Hahaha.”

Maru grinned as he flipped some more meat. There was really only one reason why he hesitated so much in jumping into things.

It was because of his wife and daughter of the future.

Despite the fact that he could barely recall their names or what they even looked like, he still loved them all the same.

The emotions were all there, even if the information wasn't.

But he recalled 'that woman' telling him that when the time came, he would definitely remember. So he needed to be ready. He didn't want to make his family live in poverty.

The saying that 'you can be happy as long as you have love' was true. But if there was more money involved in the story, you could become 'even' more happy. That's just how capitalism worked.

Most family feuds start with money. It was the same in his previous life. His family wasn't in poverty or anything, but they weren't able to live a particularly luxurious life either.

It was high time he tried living the middle class life. He didn't even dare think about trying to become filthy rich. He just didn't want his children to suffer from the lack thereof.

"Making money with acting must be hard, right?"

"....."

Miso frowned as she stopped herself from putting a lettuce wrap into her mouth.

"Would you like to hear the reality of it, or the ideals?"

"Well, they say hearing the worst of it first is always for the best, but... Tell me the good side of it first."

"If you become an actor in a popular theater company, a large salary will accompany your acting. Especially if you land a role as a main character. Plus, you have a very good chance of being spotted by movie directors or managers of large entertainment companies. You could go into movies, dramas, teaching, whatever you want. There's a bunch of things you can do to make money."

"That really does sound ideal. The reality, then?"

Miso stuffed the wrap into her mouth. She glared ferociously at the patiently waiting Maru as she chewed.

"Most theater companies are actually very close to being bankrupt. While the ideals apply to the popular theater companies, most of them struggle to get by. The smaller ones end up doing volunteer work or plays for children most of the time. They can't pay for their theater otherwise."

Miso took a glug of her soda angrily.

"A lot of the time, you might not even get paid," Geunsoo butted.

Miso glared, saying 'buzz off' from the side, but the man just ignored her completely.

"What's the first thing you think of when you think of a safe job?" he asked.

Maru found himself saying 'government worker' almost without hesitation.

"Ding ding ding, correct. That's exactly the answer for actors as well. Government funded theater companies. As long as you don't do anything incredibly crazy, there's no worry of being fired. But the number of actors who try to get into those jobs... well, there's probably more of them than there are grains of rice in this rice bowl."

Geunsoo took a deep breath before continuing.

"You're lucky if you manage to get into a government funded theater company. It's quite literally a dream job. But getting into it is harder than getting into a popular theater company. Now, let's really talk about the reality of it."

Geunsoo clapped his hands together. Miso was still glaring angrily, but he continued ignoring her.

"90% of the time, you don't even think about getting paid well. What happens to most newbie actors is that they start from the very bottom from HyeHwa station."

"Very bottom?"

"Yes. The theater calls these newbies 'actors' on paper, but these guys are just unpaid interns there to do the cleaning in reality. Well, they do feed you at the very least. But you have to be ready to be worked like a slave when you're applying for a theater company with no experience. Hell, some of these companies might even disappear without a trace before you get a chance to be paid."

"Hey, they aren't all like that. Don't scare the poor boy," Miso countered. But there was a distinct lack of confidence in her voice, contrary to her character.

"Most of these people throw away both time and money just to get a chance to be on stage. In the end, they either succeed, or leave the industry after suffering from burnout. A buddy of mine worked at a theater company until he was 35. He wasn't paid for his first year, but he stayed just so that he could be on stage. He worked shifts at night and practiced by day. He gave up on his girlfriend, family, friends just so that he could stay at HyeHwa station. He staked his life on the business."

"So, what's he doing now?"

"He went into a factory. He must be working his ass off there still. But you know what? He still wants to do acting. That's what happens to people who get consumed by acting."

Geunsoo took a shot of soju as he spoke. Though his body reeked of alcohol, he didn't seem the least bit drunk.

"I didn't do acting because I wanted a secure future. I didn't do it for money. I did it because that's what got my blood boiling. Money? I didn't care about money back then. But you do. In that case, I can tell you this. You'll make more money from doing two part time jobs at the same time. Or just study. But I don't think you're that suited for that. I'd tell you to do anything you want if you're just looking to have fun in high school. But you're purely here to prepare yourself to make money. In that case, I'd try to stop you from going into acting. The acting industry is disgustingly difficult to succeed in. No one cares how much you've worked, or how good you are at acting. No one knows who's going to succeed in this business. Looking for a stable pay in this industry? Hah, you're better off trying to teach pigs to fly."

Geunsoo took another shot of soju. Maru had to retract his previous statement. The man was definitely a bit drunk. His words were packed with grandeur, as he looked around all over the place in a daze.

“Smart people don’t buy lottery tickets looking for success. They buy it for a little bit of entertainment in their lives. Maru, you’re a smart kid, aren’t you? That means you need to think. You need to think about whether you’re in this club to make high school memories, or if you’re here to become a lunatic like the rest of us.”

Geunsoo gave Geunseok a little glance from his seat. He looked like he had a lot to say to his brother. Maru finally understood why the man gave his brother such a tense look during the dress rehearsal. He was worried about his brother following him in his footsteps.

After all, the man said himself that trying to find success in this business was akin to winning a lottery ticket. You needed talent, good looks, and luck.

Maru recalled the days he spent as a road manager. In those days, many of the actors he took care of gave up on the industry and went back to leading a normal life. Only a select few of them truly managed to make it big.

‘There sure were a lot of idols back then.’

Idols were all over televisions back in the day, and those were only the ones that were somewhat well off. 90% of them were unable to even get any screen time. As a matter of fact, there were up to 200 girl groups that debuted in a single year when he was a road manager.

‘There were a lot of groups that disbanded without succeeding.’

The memories were all flowing back again. The more he thought, the more they kept popping up in droves. Almost as if the heavens were telling him to live his life as he had done before.

“Well... having fun would be for the best, wouldn’t it?” Maru said.

It was a bit uncomfortable to see Miso’s face visibly distort in the background, but he decided to ignore it.

“I have no idea, kid. That’s your decision to make. You need to keep searching for what you want to do; when you do, just stick to it as much as you can. If the monster of acting ends up catching you, you might as well say goodbye to your normal life. The fact that Miso is attached to you is a sign that the monster noticed you already. Miso has a good eye for these things. You like safety, right? Then you should make your decision quickly. Prevent the monster from coming for you.”

Geunsoo collapsed on the spot after finishing his sentence. With that, the meal was pretty much over. They couldn’t continue with the man constantly giggling to himself on the floor. The club members walked towards the school with Miso afterwards.

“We’re sleeping at school tonight,” Dojin told Maru.

They only had a single day left until the competition. They were probably trying to save as much time as they could. Maru waved the group off as he pressed Geunsoo into Soojin’s car.

“Will you be alright?”

“This isn’t the first time this happened. I’ll be fine. This guy always tries to drink way too much when his tolerance is so low.”

Soojin lightly hit Geunsoo with a frown.

“You should be careful, too. Good work today.”

“Thank you. Take care.”

“Sure. I’ll see you in two days.”

The red car revved up and started moving. Maru watched the car disappear from his sight before getting on his bike. He felt a lot more clear minded now. Geunsoo’s words really helped.

“So this much should be fine for now.”

Doing puppet plays with Soojin, and staffing at the club.

“It’s not bad as a hobby.”

Thinking about it this way comforted him immensely. The fact that he still didn’t know where he wanted to go with his life bothered him slightly, but at least this was progress.

He started pedalling forward as he hummed to himself.

That night, Maru dreamed.

An actor in a black and white mask was bowing towards the audience on stage while the curtains were closing. And right as the curtains were about to fully close, Maru’s eyes met with the actor’s.

Maru could see the man’s lips curl up into a smile.

“You can make your decision, but I’ll be the one to give you the options to begin with.”

And, darkness.

Chapter 47

“Plays?”

Bada couldn’t quite wrap her head around that word. Plays? Her brother? Since when? Why? She knew he was doing volunteer work recently, but she didn’t know it had to do with plays.

Her brother was supposed to be playful and mean.

He was supposed to be her number one enemy.

But something was different now. He changed. He cooked meals and even did the laundry. Since when did he learn how to use the laundry machine?

When her brother told her to get out of her room for a second so that he could vacuum it, Bada had to seriously start thinking about where her real brother went. Maybe he was switched with an alien?

Why else would he be so nice? He was studying hard to boot.

[Bada, mom believes you'll do everything on your own.]

Mom would always tell Bada that whenever she saw brother studying. Normally, Bada would feel annoyance upon being compared, but she couldn't refute it at this point.

"I might be late, so be sure to get yourself some food without me. Call me if you're planning on going somewhere. Try to come back early," Maru said as he put on his clothes.

Recently, Bada's started seeing little bits of their dad coming from her brother. It was weird. Then again, she was starting to get used to it too.

"Are you going to be really late?"

"Dunno. I'll have to see when the event ends."

Maru raised his head for a second as he tied his shoes.

"You can tag along if you're bored."

Bada vigorously shook her head. That sounded absolutely horrific. Going somewhere with her brother? No way in hell! She's gotten lost under his watch enough times already.

"Watch the house for me, then. Oh," Maru took out a bill from his pocket and handed it to her, "use this if you need it."

Bada could only stare at that point before shaking her head.

"What's up with him?"

It honestly might be better if he returned to his old annoying self.

* * *

Maru's jaw dropped when he got off the bus. He hadn't thought that there would be this many people here for the competition, since it was only the preliminaries for the regionals. The cultural center was filled to the brim with all sorts of people.

There were people in casual clothes, people in suits, and people in military attire.

All students, of course. They must've come in their costumes.

"Good luck!"

"Good luck, Gunjung high!"

"Bunjung high! You'll get number one again this time too!"

There were students cheering their teams on here as well. The teachers around them were telling the kids to be quiet, but their eyes told another story.

"You're here?" someone called out from behind.

It was Daemyung, dressed up in a suit. Dojin was there too.

"Dang, I can barely recognize you," Maru noted.

Both of them had their hair done and had a bunch of makeup on them. They looked a bit awkward in their costume, but that was only really because of age.

“Cool, right?” Dojin asked. His dark eyes were contrasted by his pale cheeks.

Their makeup was probably there to show that they were portraying two tired salarymen.

“Yeah, you look good. Where are the others?”

“In there. We can only go into the waiting room when it’s our turn. That’s why everyone’s outside.”

“Do you know how many teams are here? There’s so many people.”

“21 schools and 300 participants, I think. That’s what some guy told us earlier.”

Probably over 500 if you included everyone else.

“Here, take this. It’s a pamphlet I found at the entrance,” Daemyung said.

Maru was greeted by a short introduction on all the participating teams, upon opening the pamphlet.

The competition would go on for 3 days. By its end, 5 teams would qualify to compete in the national competition. Maru moved over to the place where the club was stationed. He found the lot standing next to one of the buses in the parking lot.

“You’re here?”

“Welcome.”

The first and the second years greeted him in their costumes. They looked much sharper than usual, partially thanks to their full makeup.

“Cheer us on, please?” Yoonjung said with a wave. While Joonghyuk greeted him with his eyebrows. Minsung and Danmi, on the other hand, were busy checking each other’s lines.

“I’ll be sure to cheer all of you on, so make sure to get first place.”

“Right! Of course we’ll win! I’ll cry otherwise.”

Knowing Yoonjung, she really might just do that. In comparison to the confident second years, the first years were just looking at the entrance of the cultural center nervously. Dojin and Daemyung included.

“Hah... We wouldn’t make any mistakes, would we?”

“That would screw us big time.”

“Dang, what do I do? I can barely remember my lines.”

The group of first years were getting rowdy in their unrest. Their time were spent frantically memorizing their lines, save for Geunseok and Iseul, who were trying to meditate a little.

Maru approached Geunseok.

“How are you doing?”

“Nervous. I have a lot of lines.”

The boy must've been feeling the same as all the other kids despite his complexion. Maru lightly squeezed Geunseok's shoulders.

“Just do whatever you want. That'll be enough.”

“Right. You worked hard too. Our set wouldn't look this good if it wasn't for you.”

Geunseok pointed to the props for the 'store' leaning on the door. Maru smiled. His own props would be on the stage soon. Though he didn't participate directly, it still made him feel satisfied with his work.

“Soon, I'll finally start to follow my brother's footsteps...”

Maru turned to look when he heard the other boy whisper. The boy firmly shut his mouth afterwards though. Was it for self-encouragement? Perhaps something else?

'Why does he look so nervous though?'

Geunseok looked like he was going to collapse right there and then for some reason. Much unlike himself from just a few minutes prior. But before Maru was able to figure out what that nervousness was about,

“Blue Sky team from Woosung Engineering high school, please enter!”

One of the staff members had come to find them. The club members jumped into standing positions immediately.

Maru grabbed hold of Geunseok one more time before he left.

“Show me everything you've got.”

He decided not to say 'do well', since he felt like it would only pressure the boy. Only then did Geunseok's tension lessen as he nodded with a slightly more relaxed face.

Perhaps that earlier nervous expression of his was just a one-off thing.

“You should go to the audience seats. Take a look at how great they've gotten,” Miso said, patting his back.

Maru nodded. He wasn't planning on missing any of it. The club worked very hard for the past 5 months. He had a sneaking suspicion that they'd be able to qualify with ease as long as they don't make any noticeable mistakes.

He could see Soojin and Geunsoo walking from where Miso was previously. By then, the woman had already entered the building with the club.

“Let's go. We have to see how good they are.”

Geunsoo said, doing a slight stretch with his arms. Soojin walked in with a small smile on her face.

They were first to go in the competition.

Maru had no idea if this was a good thing or not. But in any case, the play had already begun. People were beginning to stream in through the doors one by one.

There were already a few people in the front seat. They were probably judges.

“Oh, I know that mister,” one of the kids said, pointing at a middle-aged judge.

Some of the older ladies began to speak amongst each other. They were talking about the morning dramas he was a part of in the past.

“Hold on, I’m going to go greet them real quick.”

Geunsoo walked towards the middle-aged man, who stood up excitedly. The two shook hands after some small talk.

“Here’s a decent place. Let’s sit here,” Geunsoo said after coming back.

The man took his place in the middle of the seats. Maru and Soojin decided to follow. Since this was just the regionals, the school didn’t send any students to cheer for the club. Apparently that would only happen if the club managed to qualify for the nationals.

“Um, senior?” Maru asked.

“Hm?”

“How was Geunseok this morning?”

“My brother? Why?”

“It’s probably nothing, but he seemed really nervous a few minutes ago. I was just wondering about that.”

“.....”

Geunsoo closed his mouth tightly. That didn’t bode well at all.

“To be quite honest, I’d love it if my brother didn’t come into this industry.”

Maru wasn’t very surprised to hear this. This ended up surprising Geunsoo in turn.

“You noticed?”

“It really sounded like the stuff you told me at the restaurant was directed towards your brother.”

Geunsoo knew the industry very well. He did experience all of it first hand. He probably didn’t take it too well when his brother tried to get into acting.

‘I would try to stop my sister if she said she wanted to be a driver, too.’

Maru knew first hand how disgusting the industry was. Like anyone else, he wanted his family to have a relatively easy time in their lives.

“You caught on quite well. As expected of the boy Miso has her eyes on. You’re right, I don’t want my brother to try to imitate me.”

Imitate? That's a strange way to put it. It didn't sound good at all.

"My brother... is smart. He went into an engineering high school when he could've gotten into any other better school. I was pretty upset when I heard about it. Why? Because I was the one who exposed him into acting to begin with."

Geunsoo leaned back on his chair, and lowered his voice.

"Geunseok is a very timid child."

"Excuse me?"

Timid? Him?

"I don't mean timid in that he's very quiet or reserved. By timid, I mean... he's incredibly susceptible to external influences."

Susceptible to external influences. Maru nodded. He understood that meaning perfectly.

"He doesn't know what he wants to do, because he's so conscious of other people. He ends up trying to fit himself into a mold that other people make for him. You know what that kid told me when I asked him why he studied all those years ago? He told me he studied to get compliments."

"Ah..."

The source of Geunseok's nervousness was starting to reveal itself.

"My brother no longer craves my parents' attention due to a small family incident. But..."

"He ended up looking up at you instead. Craving praises from you."

"That's right. My brother is incredibly smart. He's good at studying, and he's physically very blessed as well. I was actually pretty surprised at how good he was at the last dress rehearsal. Especially since I never taught him anything. Yet he already had all of the basics down. He must've studied hard."

So Geunseok managed to get that good just by teaching himself, huh.

Geunsoo frowned dejectedly.

"I came home immediately when Geunseok told me he was going to go to the high school I graduated from. Ah, you asked me how he was this morning, right? I live separately from him, so I have no idea. But in any case, I started arguing to him right there. I asked him why he wanted to be an actor all of the sudden. Then..."

Geunsoo put a hand over his face and sighed deeply.

"He told me he wanted to follow me in my footsteps. He said the people at Hyeohwa station that day shone like stars on the stage. He wanted to be one of those people. That's fine. That's fine and all, but... He's missing one critically important thing to complete the equation."

"Resolution," Maru found himself blurting out.

Geunsoo looked at Maru with narrowed eyes as he nodded.

“That’s exactly right. My brother is just looking at the best possible outcomes. He doesn’t even stop to think about what would happen if he fails. It’s pretty obvious why. The boy has only experienced failure a few times before. But I know. I know that if he begins slipping once, he would never recover. There was a time when he did a little bit badly on his first day of tests in school. It wasn’t anything big. He would’ve easily gotten into the high rankings if he made up his mind for the next day. But he thought it was all over right there. Because he’s never been scolded over anything, a single failure ruined him completely.”

“Did you take care of Geunseok after that?”

“Of course. He called me and just sobbed silently over the phone. I briefly heard him whisper that he even wanted to kill himself. He doesn’t seem to remember that, though. I practically ran over home to tell him that he was fine. He recovered really quickly after that, which made me feel pretty proud. I felt like I did a proper job as a brother. That day, I took him to Hyeonhwa station. He found himself a dream that day. A dream that was incredibly small... and easy to be broken.”

“Did you try talking to him?”

Geunsoo shook his head.

“Nope.”

“Why?”

“The boy’s fully relying on me now. It’s good that he’s released himself from craving our parent’s praises, but he’s stuck to me now.”

“That just means you should’ve tried to solve this by talking.”

“That’s not possible. My brother can’t be reasoned with right now.”

Geunsoo crossed his arms and turned to look back at the stage. The stage managers were doing final checks of all the equipment.

“He’s still a kid. He may look mature due to his appearance, but he’s still incredibly childish inside. My brother’s life is built on praises. Everything he does is purely to get praises. That hasn’t changed. The only thing that changed is whom he wants to get praises from. It’s become an eternal cycle. Trying to change that with just words?”

Geunsoo turned to look back at Maru.

“The one thing that separates humans from animals is the power of communication. But humans aren’t very logical at all. While all of us try to seek facts and reality, but... Just take a look at the news for a few minutes. You’ll end up seeing all sorts of crazy people. In the end, words only really carry their meaning in certain situations. Which means... What really changes people aren’t words, it’s experience.”

Geunsoo sighed. The man hoped to see his brother fail. So that’s what was up with his troubled gaze back at school. But there was still one thing Maru was curious about.

Geunseok’s acting was perfect. He was great during all of the rehearsals. There were a lot of people here in the audience, but Maru didn’t doubt that Geunseok would do well.

But Geunsoo was here to see Geunseok fail. That was the only reason why he was here.

Did that mean Geunseok would fail?

Geunsoo continued talking after a small pause.

Chapter 48

“My brother likes being judged. He exhilarates in the fact that he’s better than others. That’s why he enjoys getting tested most of the time. But...”

Maru understood just what Geunsoo was worried about.

“He’d dig his own grave the moment he makes a small mistake.”

“He might’ve changed a little bit since middle school. But traumas of such caliber don’t get fixed very easily. If he’s recovered, then it’s something to be celebrated. But I personally think he’s going to suffer from quite a bit of humiliation today.”

“But at the same time, don’t you want him to succeed? You must know better than anyone how exhilarating it is to be an actor.”

Geunsoo grinned at that.

“You’re right. I would love to see my brother go through the proper steps and become an actor. I want him to experience failure and utter hopelessness. Only then can he start thinking about acting more seriously. He’s already experienced failure in studying before, so he’s fine if he fails in it again. But what about acting? Tests are like a duel with your own self, but acting is different. The pressure from the audience can’t be ignored.”

“You sound pretty confident that Geunseok would fail.”

“Who knows? He might not. But something tells me that won’t be the case. It’s not like knowing that changes anything though, so I’m just waiting.”

The man sounded pretty calm, but it was obvious that he was feeling nervous himself. He was tapping his arm with his finger constantly.

“It’s strange, isn’t it? I don’t want my brother to take up acting, but I would love to get on stage with him. That’s exactly why he needs to suffer from failure. If he manages to stand back up by himself afterwards... Then the monster of acting would really reach out to him. That’s when I really plan on helping him out.”

The doors of the auditorium closed right then, with the speakers saying the first play was about to begin. Maru noticed the judges in the front taking out their papers. Maru thought for a second about how Geunseok would be right behind those curtains just now.

‘Hold on.’

In the future, Geunsoo becomes an actor who makes a permanent impact on the world of Korean entertainment. Then what about Geunseok? Maru didn’t recall seeing the name anywhere.

It wasn't because he couldn't remember the name in his memory. Quite the contrary. In the future that Maru knew, Geunsoo mentioned in an interview about a brother that was working as a normal salaryman.

"What if he doesn't end up being able to recover, and... tries to rely on you again?"

"I'll have to console him again. He's family, after all. I'll stop him from going into acting, though. This industry isn't a very kind one, especially not for kids like Geunseok. If you want to achieve your dreams, you need the courage to be able to give it up. Those who can't will be used and used until they get thrown away. I don't want my brother to live a life like that."

Geunsoo ended the conversation coldly with just that. A person who wants to chase their dream should have the courage to give it up. Maru didn't expect to hear his father's exact words here.

When the lights in the auditorium turned off, the audience became quiet and directed their attention to the stage. Geunsoo looked at the stage with short huffs. He was glaring intensely, like an appraiser at an antique store.

Maru decided to just focus on the show for now as well. There was nothing he could do right now. Perhaps Geunsoo's worry for his brother didn't warrant another thought. Maybe the play could end perfectly, and Geunseok would be able to chase after his brother with no worries.

But the nervousness Maru felt from Geunseok this morning, and Geunsoo's reaction held bad omens.

'Hopefully things will end well.'

The only thing he could do was to pray.

* * *

Yurim was momentarily confused about where she was. The moment she looked out to the audience seats, she became unable to breathe. There were a lot of people there.

They were all here to see their play. That alone made her feel incredibly nervous.

'Calm down.'

She gripped the phone next to her on the desk. This phone held a special meaning to her. Back when Yurim was still in the second grade of middle school, raving about her new phone, a black van stopped in front of her.

Several men in black shirts stepped off, asking her where the nearby elementary school was.

Right then, the first thing her mind thought of was the recent string of disappearances in the news. Something about people snatching middle schoolers to send to some far-off island. Yurim looked around in fear, but there was no one around and it was late in the day as well. She regretted everything just then.

She should've listened to her mom. She should've come back home early.

The men in black slowly approached her. She couldn't move. She was paralyzed in fear.

The phone rang right there. It was mom.

That woke her right up. She screamed at the men and backed off. The men didn't give chase. They got right into their cars and ran away. Yurim hadn't let go of her phone since. It was her lucky charm. Without it, she wouldn't even be here right now.

'I can do it.'

She gripped her phone tightly. It calmed her a little bit. Some of her friends thought she was weird for being so attached to her phone, but it couldn't be helped. Being without it made her feel really nervous.

Right then, someone's hand touched her phone hand gently. It was Soyeon. The first friend Yurim made in high school. The girl was a great person who cared about Yurim's well-being.

"We can do it."

"Yeah."

It was difficult for her to make friends after that incident, especially due to the reserved nature she developed from it. But Soyeon approached her first. Yurim recalled the girl's words upon their first meeting. 'Your hair's such a pretty color,' Soyeon had said.

Yurim put down her phone. With her friend by her side, she wouldn't need to worry about anything.

"Fighting."

"Yeah, fighting."

Right then, they got the signal to get ready. The two of them took a deep breath in together.

"Come over here," Miso called out.

The twelve of them all gathered at once.

"I'm not going to tell you to do well, or not to get nervous. You'll see when you get on stage that things will be different from before. But it'll be alright. Just throw yourselves in there. You'll find that your body reacts almost on its own thanks to all the practices you've done. Don't let fear and nervousness paralyze you. Take it all in. It's only natural to feel afraid."

Clap clap!

Miso stretched her hand out to the middle of the circle after a short clap. The twelve hands all gathered in the middle with it.

"Blue Sky!!"

"Yeah!"

Yurim felt the nervousness melt from her body with just that. The others must've felt similarly, judging by their smiles.

Except...

'Eh?'

Geunseok looked a little strange. He didn't look nervous. But he seemed to be putting on some sort of an air about him.

"Geunseok, I told you, didn't I? Don't try to do well. Just do what you can. Trust in all the work you've done till now. Understand?" Miso asked. She seemed to have noticed as well.

Yurim decided to stop worrying about it. Right. She'll just try to reap the rewards from the practices.

"The show is about to begin," one of the staff members reminded them.

Now, this was the true beginning.

* * *

Geunseok thought that this was his first step to becoming more like his brother. Since these were the exact steps his brother once took, Geunseok would have to as well. After getting first place here, he would go onto nationals and get first place there.

"Phew."

The lights on the stage turned on, the sofa and the table shining under it. The sounds from the TV started playing as well.

It was no different from the dress rehearsal. There was no need to tremble.

Geunseok could see the audience seats from the curtain. Out of everyone there, the three people at the front stood out to him the most.

In the meantime, Minsung and Joonghyuk's scene began. At the same time, the trio's pens started moving in their hands. Even from the dark audience seats, the shiny reflection from the pens stood out to Geunseok.

'They must be the judges.'

There was a need to look good in front of these people, Geunseok decided. He would try to direct his gaze to them as much as possible, to make himself more memorable to them.

'It's my turn.'

He stepped in after confirming that Minsung left the stage. His steps were natural. Good. As long as he kept going like this, nothing would go wrong.

* * *

The show was going on perfectly. Each scene transitioned seamlessly. The pronunciation and the projection of the club members were great as well. Their movements seemed experienced and natural, too.

Clearly, this was the result of their practices.

They really were doing it perfectly. At this rate, the entire thing would finish without a hitch, and the entire crew would be greeted with applause in the end.

Maru turned to look at Geunsoo. The man looked... conflicted. He looked at Geunseok whenever it became the boy's turn to take the stage. Whenever Geunseok finished a monologue safely, Geunsoo would sigh in relief.

"It'll end well, don't worry," Maru whispered.

Geunsoo just smiled lightly in response.

* * *

"Kids these days are so irresponsible!"

Dojin and Daemyung stepped onto the stage with a big footfall. Geunseok could only applaud the two in his head. They came in so cleanly. Even better than usual. He really felt like he was getting scolded by adults here.

Perfect. The play today was perfect.

The two friends behind him spoke out in unison. He'd heard the same line over a hundred times already.

Again, perfect.

Geunseok glanced over at the judges sitting in front. He couldn't discern their faces, but he did see one of them nod in satisfaction. Good. They were doing well.

'Nice, we'll be able to score nicely.'

The play was reaching the climax at this point. As long as he did everything well from now, they should take first place with ease.

'Maybe I'll even get an acting award.'

Geunseok's brother had gotten all sorts of acting awards straight from the regionals all the way to the nationals. He even received the award for best actor in the nationals.

Getting an award here was the least Geunseok could do. He'll get one for sure. He didn't feel nervous at all. As a matter of fact, there was only confidence in his head. He'll be the one to end this play perfectly for sure!

"Waaaah!"

Somewhere out in the seats, a kid cried out. Where? Geunseok turned to look at the audience. There was a kid on one side. The mother quickly took the boy outside. Not a big problem. But right then, he noticed something.

'Why's it so quiet?'

He couldn't hear his friends talk. They should be saying their lines about now. What's up? They had all simultaneously stopped speaking for some reason.

He felt his insides start to burn furiously. What, they forgot their lines just because of a single kid? Unacceptable. They couldn't move on unless someone finished here. Geunseok looked in front of him. If

he looked back now, the others would only get more shocked. The only thing he could do was trust that the others would remember their lines.

Right then, his eyes met with one of the judge's.

It was an interesting feeling, like a single spotlight was focused on just that judge. He could see the judge's expressions clearly, even. The man had a very big frown on his face. That was bad.

There was no helping it now. Geunseok decided to turn around to let the others know about their mishap.

But right then, someone grabbed his shoulder. This wasn't in the script. Why? As soon as he turned his head, he realized exactly why.

Taejoon was looking at him wide-eyed, with Iseul quickly saying 'H-hey Jungsoo, are you mad because of the mister?' at him. That line wasn't in the script.

At the same time, he realized something.

His friends weren't the ones who missed a line.

It was him.

* * *

Maru scratched his eyebrows as he closed one of his eyes. He couldn't bear watching for much longer. But at the same time, he knew he had to keep watching. In the end, he just decided to close one of them to try to keep his cool.

Geunseok messed up his timing. The problem was, he didn't even know that his timing was off. The first thing he did when the kid cried a while back was to just stare at the kid. In that short while, Taejoon and Iseul had already finished their lines.

After that, Geunseok just stared forward silently. Just what was he looking at?

"Kids who grew up on praises can't live without it. That's how they were raised, so they become sensitive to people who judge them. Of course, it's important for an actor to be aware of what the audience is thinking. But the most important quality of an actor is to be in sync with other actors on the stage. An actor too focused on the audience won't realize his mistake when he makes one. A common mistake amateur actors make."

Geunsoo stood up, and quietly left the auditorium. The time Geunseok looked at the audience silently was around 15 seconds. Those few seconds of silence felt incredibly long to the audience.

"What the?"

"Did something happen?"

"What's he doing?"

People started whispering all around Maru. The audience were sensitive to changes on stage. They could very easily catch onto an actor's mistakes. They knew instantly that this silence was unintended.

In the end, Iseul stepped forward. But by then, it was all too late.

'It's not like we can criticize them, though. They're just beginners.'

As a matter of fact, Iseul probably deserved praise for having the courage to step in like that. The girl opened her mouth. Geunseok's shoulders shook a little bit, and the boy finally managed to look backwards. He seemed to have realized what happened.

The boy stuttered out a few words in shock. His charisma from seconds before was nowhere to be seen. Very uncharacteristic of who he was playing.

If Geunseok behaved like this in the beginning, things would've been fine. Jungsoo started off as a nervous boy after all. But they were stepping things up into the final scene at this point.

The main character by now should've matured, and have the convictions to go toe-to-toe against his father.

But Geunseok stuttered nervously just now. The entire character of Jungsoo just crumbled right there. The structure of the entire place collapsed. But worst of all, Geunseok was just staring into one section of the audience as if he was frozen.

Maru realized what was happening. The boy was looking at the judges. Almost as if he was trying to say that all this wasn't supposed to happen.

And then, darkness.

It was the last scene. The table in the middle of the stage was set up. The conversation here would mark the end of the play.

Maru sighed. The seed of nervousness lingering from Geunseok this morning had finally bloomed.

"...Hopefully they don't get too set back by this," Soojin whispered.

She was looking at the stage with a saddened look.

The lights turned on again, illuminating the actors who were seated around the table. And a few minutes later, the play ended.

The club members all stepped onto the stage joyfully with a calming music playing in the background. They looked like they completely forgot about what happened moments prior. Geunseok stepped onto the stage after everyone else.

He looked like he was utterly dead inside.

The club bowed towards the audience. Maru bowed towards the club members in return.

Good work for the last three months.

And with that, the first play on the first day of regionals in the Southern part of Gyeonggi province came to an end.

Chapter 49

"It's hot," Maru noted, staring up at the sky.

The blazing sunlight was making his shadow look longer than normal. Grayer, too. Even the shadow started to look a bit lighter from how bright the sun was. Some of the students were even coming to school in gym clothes. Since shorts weren't allowed by the school, they just decided to come in gym clothes instead.

Maru had done the exact same as well. It was mid-July. The students were only a week away from starting their summer vacation, the weather has turned the school into a giant steaming pot.

As a matter of fact, it was so hot that even the disciplinary teacher didn't leave the building all day. Thanks to that, the students who had their hair done were able to proudly walk into the school without any worries.

"Summer vacation can't start soon enough."

After all, the best part of being a student was their vacation. Maru parked his bike and ran inside. The cold air was a huge relief.

"Phew, I feel so much better."

Maru sat down to look at the seat next to him. It didn't look like Dojin came to school just yet.

"Ugh, it's so hot."

Daemyung came over from his row to sit at Dojin's seat. After the play, Daemyung had gained some of his weight back. He didn't look very fat though. Just a little bit chubby.

"The fan on the front row isn't working."

"You have a window though."

"The window's only letting in hot air. It's insane."

Daemyung fanned himself with his mouth half-open. There was a little picture of a computer pasted onto it. He must've gotten it near an electronic market or something.

"You got an extra fan?"

"No, you want to use this?"

Daemyung offered his fan, but Maru shook his head.

"You've been eating a lot of tasty stuff recently?" Maru asked.

"Hahaha, yeah, I've eaten a fair bit. Been craving a lot."

"Try to cut down a bit. You look perfect right now."

"Yeah, for real. If I try to lose some again for practice..."

Daemyung's face fell a little bit the moment he said the word.

Practice.

He hadn't spoken the word in a while. The door to the classroom opened with a creak. It was Dojin. Daemyung stood up from his seat with a smile.

"You barely made it.."

"Man, I ran like I was going for a home steal. I flipping thought I had the alarm clock set, but when I woke up, it was eight already. I barely ate breakfast and just bolted it."

Dojin collapsed on his seat. Daemyung fanned Dojin lightly from the side.

"Did you play games last night?" Maru asked.

"It was intense last night. Right, Daemyung?"

Daemyung nodded with an excited grin.

"We ended up catching a boss we were waiting for. It's a popular one, so it was super hard to try to catch it."

"We were lucky yesterday. Dojin managed to find it first."

Right then, the rest of the kids in the class walked towards them. They seemed to have played the game together. Maru smiled looking at the familiar scene.

"The drops were so trash though."

"Ugh, and I used so many potions too..."

"For real."

"It did drop a lot of cash though. We should try again."

"You should join us too, Maru," Dojin offered.

Maru received the offer several times in the past. In his previous life, he probably would've played the game as much as he could from the open beta period.

He was still playing the game now, but only up to an hour or two a day. He couldn't catch up to the other kids. In the end, his friends were way above where he was currently.

"RPGs are no good for me. Too much grinding. I'll just play whenever I feel free."

"Ugh, bro, I told you that I can grind for you."

"Just carry me bro."

The kids laughed in unison. Maru looked at his two friends for a second. This scene had become their daily life again. Contrary to last month, when they were gripping their scripts with passion.

"What are you thinking, Maru?" Dojin asked, waving his hand in front of Maru's face.

Maru blurted out what was on his mind without really thinking about it.

"How long are you guys planning on just reading your script for the club?"

His two friends fell completely silent after hearing his words. That was a mistake, Maru realized. The two still haven't recovered after the play last month.

Daemyung was the first to break the silence.

"We're thinking about entering the teen acting competition hosted by Gwangho University."

"Still?"

"Yeah."

"Is it because of Geunseok?"

"....."

They became silent again. The bell for the first class rang right then. Daemyung smiled awkwardly before returning to his seat. Maru turned to look at Dojin, who smiled similarly, before taking out a piece of candy.

"Want one?"

"Sure."

"Here."

Dojin popped a piece in his mouth himself and fell silent. Maru looked at his two friends. Their minds seemed to have come to a pause after the regionals last month.

* * *

At the play a month ago, the first thing Maru saw at the waiting room was Geunseok collapsed on the wall, with the club members looking at the boy.

"If it wasn't for that kid, if it wasn't for him... The judges..."

Geunseok wasn't able to raise his head. He was just repeating the same words over and over again. The club members didn't look mad at all, they looked like they needed an explanation. They didn't understand what had happened.

Just what caused the perfect Geunseok to make such an amateur mistake?

That day, the club split apart. Miso didn't try to assemble the club members either.

[Trying to come together on a day like this would be too cruel for that boy,] Miso had said.

The club met together the next day in the club room. The members tried to console each other saying that they would do better next time.

But the look of "how?" would still not leave their eyes. Geunseok's mistake was just that shocking to them.

Nothing changed since then. They spent a full week consoling each other. And on the day when the results of the competition got announced, the club met again. Taesik, the teacher, was the one who

announced the results. He told the club that this was a good experience for them, and that they could do better next time. But ultimately, he said the club failed to qualify.

Geunseok cried. He said in a sobbing voice that he was sorry. Daemyung was the next to burst into tears, with Yurim following the two of them. The eleven members of the club got together to console each other. Maru didn't join in. Instead, watching from the side.

He had no place with them. They could only console each other because they worked together for the full three months. Maru didn't have the right to cry or get angry together.

Joonghyuk was the first to recover, saying that they should practice for the other acting competitions coming up later this year. Namely, the college acting festival. It was nothing compared to the national one, but it was the one competition that started soon after the regionals.

The competition was also well-known as the 'losers' festival'.

As the club members nodded at Joonghyuk, Maru noticed Geunseok saying something from the corner.

[If it wasn't for that kid...]

The boy was repeating the same words from before. It didn't look like anyone else picked up on it. Right then, the two's eyes met. Geunseok flinched like a surprised kid and lowered his head. Perhaps what he said just then was what he truly felt about the competition.

After that day, the club completely disappeared from the auditorium. They met on the weekends occasionally just to do some reading, but not much else. They didn't need much practice, since they would go into the college competition with the same play from before.

There was a change, though. Miso stopped coming.

Perhaps the change should've been expected. She was only really here to help the club along for their regionals after all.

[I'm going into a different project this time. I wasn't going to do it, but well, I have some time now,]
Maru recalled her saying.

She tried not to show it, but Maru did detect a great amount of disappointment on her face. She loved the club more than anyone else. The loss of the club this time was probably very saddening for her as well.

Once Maru thought about this much, the door opened, and the teacher walked in. The first thing the middle-aged man said after walking in was "open your books".

Time to focus on the class.

Maru took out his book from his desk.

* * *

It was lunchtime. Any other time, the students would have rushed towards the cafeteria, but this time everyone was walking like zombies.

It was hot as hell.

“Oh my god, it’s so hot.”

“Seriously...”

“Saying that’s only going to make it worse. Just imagine it’s cold.”

“You sound like my dad.”

“I mean, there’s a reason adults say these kinds of things.”

Maru fanned with his hand as he spoke. The summer heat lowered his appetite, and the lunch menu was also unappetizing. He was craving meat quite a bit today, but... The school decided it was time for a vegetable party.

“Braised potatoes and braised lotus root. Anyone want to trade?”

“Pass.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna pass on that too.”

The food at this school was somewhat edible, but the braised potatoes were by far the worst. The crunchy potatoes and watery sauce made the braised dish unappetizing. In the end, the dish just tasted like a whole bunch of raw potatoes.

“Huh?”

Daemyung pointed at Geunseok in front of him. The boy was going to the cafeteria with his friends. Behind him were Yurim and Soyeon.

“Am I imagining things? Why are the three of them so far apart?” Dojin said, narrowing his eyes.

Maru couldn’t help but think the same thing. The three of them were very good friends with each other. But the group seemed to have an awkward atmosphere today. Yurim and Soyeon still looked like they were good friends. But there was definitely something going on with Geunseok.

Dojin ran forward, coming right up between Yurim and Soyeon. What a social kid. He immediately waved his hand towards Daemyung and Maru. The two girls waved towards them as well.

“Let’s go.”

“Sure.”

Maru and Daemyung made their way over to the trio.

“Braised potatoes today.”

“Soyeon, want some of my share?”

“I like eating, but it’s a hard pass on that.”

They were talking about the potatoes here, too. Maru glanced over at Geunseok in front of him. The boy looked back after joking around a bit with his friends. Their eyes met. Maru raised his hand in a greeting, and the boy awkwardly did the same.

Geunseok's definitely changed. Outside of the club, he smiled a lot, and became casual. It wasn't like he started talking a lot more, but he was definitely more social than he was in the auditorium. But look at him now. He looked like a kid who did something wrong, not knowing what to do next.

Maru turned to look at Yurim and Soyeon. The two also had awkward smiles on their faces. There was definitely a barrier between the three of them. A pretty big one, too.

"Did you guys have a fight?" Maru asked.

He knew that he probably shouldn't be asking something so personal, but he felt something strange was going on between the group.

The two girls shook their heads vigorously in response. Yurim, in particular, shook hard enough to make her hair flutter wildly.

"Nothing's happening, nothing."

Yurim clenched her phone incredibly tightly as she spoke. There was no way she would look convincing doing so. It would be rude of him to pry further though, so he decided to continue walking into the cafeteria silently.

"There's something going on, isn't there?" Dojin whispered.

"Let's stay quiet for now. They'll handle it among themselves."

"Mm."

Maru looked at Geunseok in front of him. The smiling boy didn't look as comfortable as he made himself to be.

Chapter 50

"Let's go up."

The trio started moving before the class bell rang. On their way up, they met Taejoon and Iseul. The two of them waved cheerfully at the boys.

"Are you guys doing anything after school?" Iseul asked.

The three of them shook their heads.

"Let's go to a karaoke bar then. Down?"

Iseul stared at them intensely. The girl had a knack of always getting what she wanted. The way things looked right now, the three of them would have to attend the karaoke bar this evening no matter what.

As the group talked, they reached the fifth floor auditorium. A month ago, the auditorium would've been filled with Miso's shouts, but not now. When they opened the door, they were greeted with the second years.

“Come here.”

The first years sat down in a circle. Maru joined in as well. There was no reason for him to sit elsewhere, since they pretty much stopped practicing at this point. They just made small talk here now.

“It’s getting pretty hot, isn’t it? Good thing we can use the auditorium. Being in the club room at this hour would be horrifying,” Joonghyuk said with a grin.

The whole group laughed lightly in response. Despite the smiles, Maru caught a faint scent of unease in the air. Probably because the group wasn’t laughing for real.

“Now then! Our ever-rich senior Joonghyuk will be providing the club with drinks again!”

Minsung stood up with a shout. He, too, must’ve felt the heavy air in the club. Joonghyuk immediately started arguing about why Minsung included himself in the group of ‘Joonghyuk’s juniors’. The other boy just feigned innocence playfully. The first years smiled, lightening the mood a little bit more.

Right then, the first years from the faculty of design walked in. Geunseok was the first to come in, with Soyeon and Yurim following close behind.

“Welcome!” Yoonjung greeted the three. She moved aside a little to make space for them.

Maru observed Yurim for a second. The girl was looking down at the ground like a shy kid. Presumably because of what happened earlier.

“Hey.”

“Ah, um, hey.”

The girl spoke only when Maru greeted her. As expected, she was gripping her phone this time as well.

“Alright, let’s start off with a reading for today as well,” Yoonjung said with a clap.

After failing at the regionals, all they could do were readings. They didn’t even do it for long either. Just once most of the time, and twice if they felt good enough. That was their entire practice for the week.

Once the reading was finished, the group started talking for a bit. They updated each other on what has happened recently, and how the week was for each other. Just a small tea party between the club members.

The passion from before was nowhere to be seen.

Maru understood completely. They were all tired. People couldn’t run forever, after all. They needed rest.

‘Not like I can intervene either.’

He was well aware that taking a longer rest would only make it harder for them to start seriously again, but he didn’t really feel the need to explain it to them. The club worked harder than anyone for the past three months. They would eventually get over their feelings of defeat, humiliation, and sadness. Practice would resume, and they would return to their passionate selves once again.

Maru believed in them, so he saw no point in worrying about it. The reading began shortly after Yoonjung's clap. The club members weren't posturing any of the movements, but they did make eye contacts. They carried emotions in their voice after quietly communicating with each other with their eyes.

Their skills were clearly displayed with their composure. The experience from the past three months were clearly beneficial for them. They failed at qualifying for nationals, but surely they could go for an award at the college competition.

Eventually, it became Geunseok's turn to speak.

"Yes. I understand. I'll do it."

The pronunciation, volume, and emotion that Geunseok put into the line was flawless. But there was one thing missing. The boy's eyes were stuck right on the ground. Yoonjung's eyebrows flicked up in annoyance. She tried to say something, but she was stopped right there by Joonghyuk.

This situation repeated itself for the past month. If anyone pointed out Geunseok's mistake, then the club would inevitably have to talk about the incident from a month ago again. This was too much for anyone in the club to take. Joonghyuk must've realized that bringing it up would only serve to develop a chasm within the club.

Maru's eyes met with Joonghyuk's. The older boy's eyes seemed to be asking him if they should give Geunseok more time. Right then, an angry voice came from a place no one's expected.

It was Soyeon.

"Hey, Geunseok, we're supposed to be reading."

"Eh? Yeah. I'm reading. Why?"

"Why? Can't you see what's happening? The seniors are all just looking at you right now."

Soyeon looked pretty savage in all her fury. The girl glared at Geunseok. Yurim, who was sitting between the two, just grasped her phone with a troubled look. The air in the club fell by a few degrees right there. Joonghyuk couldn't do anything at this point either.

"Geunseok! We know you're hurting a lot by this. But how long are you planning on staying like this? Can't you think about us? You don't think we're hurting at all? You're not the only one that failed this. We all did."

Geunseok's head flicked up in surprise. He lost the calm and reserved attitude he usually held, instead he looked like a surprised child who didn't know what to do.

That surprised everyone. Even Soyeon.

"Sorry, I'm sorry," the boy started apologizing.

He sounded like he didn't expect everyone to be like this either. Some people in the club sighed annoyedly. Geunseok's face fell to the ground again, making the entire club fall completely silent.

“Now, now. Let’s focus. We slipped just once. It’s not over yet. Lots of competitions to go to in the future. There’s no time to be depressed, only to practice.”

Joonghyuk stepped in to try to mediate the situation. His calm, confident voice aroused nods from everyone in the room.

Everyone except Geunseok, that is. The boy was still staring down with his two fists clenched tightly.

“I’m sorry. Because... of me... If it wasn’t for that kid then, if it wasn’t for that kid, then... I wouldn’t have been such a drag to everyone...”

“Geunseok, Soyeon just said that because she was a little frustrated. No need to get so down like that. We’re not saying that you did badly, but that it’s still not over yet. Come on, raise your head.”

Geunseok raised his head slowly. His brows were drooping downwards in shame.

“Let’s eat something after we finish reading. The atmosphere feels so annoying right now.”

Minsung took over from there. It was a common tactic that the seniors would use. They would have Joonghyuk speak some serious words and Minsung trying to lighten the mood. Usually, Yoonjung would handle what Minsung was doing here, but clearly she was in no position to do that right now.

The club looked like they somewhat recovered with that. Some of the members were starting to smile again, and they looked at each other with trust in their eyes.

Maru received some of those gazes as well.

As they did so, the club tried to pull together Geunseok again. The boy looked a little better with everyone consoling him.

“I’m so sorry. We would be at the nationals by now if it wasn’t for that kid.”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s all in the past. It was your first role as a main character in your first play. Anyone would’ve made mistakes. I’m actually pretty happy. At least we managed to get all the way to a full curtain call. Right guys? Haha.”

Danmi wrapped the entire situation up. Even Yoonjung was smiling, talking about how excited she was then. The club members all smiled excitedly.

Watching all this, Maru just smiled bitterly in the background.

‘So this is how things are going to be.’

Taking care of wounds is a good thing. Putting medicine on a wound before an infection breaks out is a thing that anyone should do. But if the wound is already infected, the first thing a person should do is to try to assess the wound. They would have to see if the wound could be treated, or if it should be cut out altogether.

Maru understood Geunsoo’s worries from the other day only then. His words about Geunseok being a child was completely correct.

One of the key traits of children was shifting the blame to others. After all, taking responsibility for their action is an incredibly difficult thing to do. It was something that only adults could do. And right now, Geunseok kept on saying 'if it wasn't for that kid' repeatedly. Come to think of it, he repeated the same words back then in the waiting room as well.

Thinking that you weren't the cause of a problem was a very comforting thing to do. Geunseok often felt very mature due to his appearance and actions. People around him probably treated him as an adult because of this. As a matter of fact, the boy was probably trying to shift the blame exactly because he didn't want to break his usual image.

[My brother hasn't failed many times before.]

The kid was probably afraid of the sudden responsibility that he had to take care of. This was an entirely different kind of responsibility from what Geunseok had to deal with in the past. The test was entirely his fault, so he couldn't shift the blame anywhere. But this time, there was a target he could shift the blame to. Plus, the weight of the responsibility this time was much bigger than it was back when he failed his test.

3 months of time, multiplied by ten people.

Perhaps Geunseok was desperately trying to find something to blame for some breathing room.

Maru stepped back for a second to observe. The club was licking each other's wounds, telling each other that things would be fine tomorrow.

But was that really the case?

[There's nothing worse than trying to help him when he falls. If that happens, he'd just tell himself he can't stand up by himself when he falls again next time, and give up.]

A voice popped up in Maru's head. He couldn't remember who it was from. Probably from someone he met in the future. The eleven club members smiled even more brightly now. They were laughing, too.

It's fine. It's going to be fine.

That was the only thing they were saying. No one was claiming that these lazy practice sessions were acting like poison to the club. Did they not understand? Or were they just being willfully ignorant?

"Now then, juniors! Who's willing to go to the mart for a bit? Joonghyuk's paying!"

As always, the club was starting to shift over to a tea party again. Maru stood up from the back.

"I'll go."

"By yourself?"

"Yes."

"I'll go with you."

"It's fine. I'll go alone."

"Really?"

“Yes. It looks like you all have a lot of things to say to each other at the moment. It doesn’t look like I should interfere, so I’ll go alone.”

Maru slowly scanned the eleven club members who were staring back at him. Some of them looked away from him in shame. Joonghyuk was the first to look away, with Iseul smiling awkwardly at him afterwards. Yurim gave a similar smile as well. At least they seemed to know what was wrong with the club.

“I’ll be back.”

Maru stepped out with the money in hand. The choice was up to them now, whether they wanted to keep applying medicine to their wound, or to assess it properly.