

Once Again 91

Chapter 91

“So... what’s all this about?”

She wanted Hanna to explain what was going on. It was nice that they came to a nearby fruit juice shop. The kiwi juice she got was pretty good, so that was fine, too. But... The question she wanted to ask the most was still unanswered.

“Well... how do I explain it.”

“Explain it?”

“A date?”

“What?”

“Between you and him! Haha. Hahaha. Heh... Don’t look at me like that. I’m your senior, you know.”

She glared at Hanna for a few more seconds before turning to look at Maru, the boy was drinking his mango juice with the most serene expression in the world. He grinned when their eyes met, which only managed to annoy her further.

“Did you ask for this?”

“No, Hanna started it first.”

“Sis! You didn’t tell me anything about this?!”

Hanna twiddled her thumb nervously.

“Well... If I told you, you wouldn’t have come.”

“Of course.”

“So I kept it a secret. Surprise!”

She rolled up her fingers into a tight fist, which made Hanna look away again. To think she used to look up to this person in the past...

‘I’m the one at fault for having expectations from her after seeing that CD.’

In her school’s club room, there was a CD with some of Hanna’s performance. It was a recording of Hanna’s exceptional act of Faust making a deal with the devil incredibly well. She’s looked at the video countless times at this point, but her admiration of Hanna didn’t last long. It stopped the moment they first met, actually.

“I feel sorry for big brother Suchan.”

“Hey, come on.”

Hanna put a hand over her mouth and grinned. She could only feel sorry for Suchan, who would probably get whisked around by Hanna after marriage.

“In any case, you two should have fun.”

Hanna took out two tickets as she spoke. They were tickets to a pretty popular theater near Hyehwa station.

“Wow.”

She snatched the tickets immediately, she wanted to watch this particular play for quite some time. Did Hanna remember when she offhandedly mentioned it once? Hanna winked at her with a smile.

“You gave me a cake for my birthday, remember? It’s for that.”

“Ah.”

“And so!”

Hanna stood up from her seat.

“I’m leaving!”

The woman walked off to the exit after shouting bye. She tried to grab Hanna with her arms, but the woman evaded her with ease.

“Big sis!”

She was too late. Hanna was already gone from the cafe, and when she ran outside, Hanna was nowhere to be seen. The woman was too damn fast at running. She gave up and looked back into the cafe with a deep sigh.

“And he’s... well, him.”

Maru was drinking his juice as if all of this wasn’t related to him at all. When their eyes met, he smiled again. Does he usually smile this much? He looks better when he’s not smiling. When she walked back inside and sat down, Maru stared at her from his seat. His blatant stare kind of made her feel embarrassed.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked.

“You got the tickets.”

“Yeah.”

“We should watch it then, right?”

“...People say you’re shameless pretty often, don’t they?”

“Who knows.”

“Hah...”

Looking at the ticket, it was scheduled for today. As a matter of fact, they would have to make a run for it to watch it.

“We should probably be able to squeeze lunch in beforehand.”

Before she knew it, Maru was right next to her looking down at the ticket himself. She flinched in surprise and stared at his face for a few seconds.

“Let’s go, we’ll be late.”

Saying that, Maru reached out to grab her wrist.

W-what the!

The boy pulled her up gently. His hand was moving so naturally that she almost thought he’s done this multiple times in the past. She looked at Maru’s back in a daze.

‘Why... does this feel familiar?’

The boy’s slightly large back looked oddly familiar, as if she’s seen it many times in the past. She stretched out her hand, feeling a strange sense of sadness inside her, and gently put it on top of his shoulder. That was when she came back to her senses.

Goodness, what did she just do? She put her hand back down and stuck it right into her pocket. She was confused. What just happened?

“Did I have something on me?”

“Yeah, yeah? Yeah! Y-you had some dust on your shoulder.”

“You brushed it off? Thanks.”

“No... problem.”

She looked down, as her cheeks puffed up like a little frog. Why did she just do that? She shook her head before raising her head again with a shocked look.

“Hold on, why are you holding my hand like it’s the most natural thing to do?!”

She completely forgot in her shock that she was still holding hands with him. The boy’s hand was rough. She pulled her hand out of it and looked at Maru with a pout.

“I can’t?”

“Do you think it’s really normal to hold a stranger’s hand just like that?”

“This is our third time meeting, though.”

“...That’s true, but still.”

“Alright. I won’t do it. Just watch that play with me. I’m giving up one thing here, so you should too.”

“What?”

“Or we could just hold hands again.”

Maru stretched out his hand again. What the heck?

“Fine! Fine, we can watch it! Darn it, you’re ridiculous!”

“We should hurry, then. If we miss the train, we won’t have time to eat.”

“Oh? You’re right.”

She flipped her hand to look at her watch. Right then, Maru grabbed her hand again. What was strange was that for a brief moment, she didn’t think this to be unnatural. As a matter of fact, she probably would’ve walked forward right there with him if she didn’t become consciously aware of it.

“Ah, sorry. I said I wouldn’t grab your hand.”

This time, Maru let go first and apologized surprisingly politely. Despite doing several odd things, he was a gentleman when it came to these things. She looked down at her right wrist, she could still feel Maru’s warmth on it.

‘...What the.’

That was the only thing she could think of when she realized that she didn’t actually hate that warmth.

* * *

After coming out of the second exit of HyeHwa station, she flinched as she got hit by the sudden wind. Cold winds like these were the ones that reminded her that it was December.

“It’s co...”

A shadow rose up right in front of her as soon as she opened her mouth, it was Maru. Before she realized what was going on, he stretched his arms out towards her. She tried to step backwards, but realized there was something warm getting wrapped around her neck right then.

“It’s cold, wear this.”

“...Yeah.”

It was Maru’s scarf. A soft scarf that had a lot of fluff on it, the type that she liked. She sniffed her nose a little bit. The scarf smelled pretty good. Did it get washed recently?

“Want to try going there?”

Maru pointed to a pasta restaurant on the other side of the road.

“Over there?”

The outside of the restaurant was decorated with logs and a fancy-looking signboard. The customers inside all looked like they were either college students or older. That is, the restaurant looked really expensive.

“Let’s go. You like cream pasta and pizza with not many toppings, don’t you?”

Maru walked forward after speaking. She silently agreed with him inside, before realizing what the boy just said.

“Wait, how did you know that? That I like cream pasta?”

“...I heard it from Hanna.”

She easily caught that hint of surprise from the boy's face. He was lying, she was sure of it.

"Really?"

Plus, she never told Hanna her favorite food. After all, Hanna was only ever interested in her own favorite food: army stew.

"...Just a feeling. Don't girls like stuff like cream pasta?"

"Well, you're not wrong, but... That doesn't make this any less suspicious."

"I just guessed."

He regained his composure. Did he really guess? Or did he have someone telling him information about her? She could easily think of a few candidates on the spot, they probably worked with Hanna for this.

"Anyway, it's cold. Let's go inside first."

Maru casually grabbed her hand again. She let out a short laugh, but didn't pull away this time. At least it was obvious that he cared for her.

* * *

She finished her food almost as soon as it came out. Maru smiled internally. Be it in the future or right now, her appetite was unchanging. She always ate well, and she used all of that energy for when she was on stage.

'That reminds me...'

Memories were giving birth to more memories. One by one, Maru started remembering events that he shared with her, each one making him want to smile more and more. Most of his memories were gone, but the times he shared with her were still deeply rooted in his heart.

"You smile really often," she said curiously.

Of course, I would. You're right there with me.

Maru swallowed those words and brushed himself off to be the type that smiled a lot.

'Well, it's going well so far, at least.'

Her favorite perfume, favorite scarf, and favorite food. Maru made use of his memories as much as possible to prepare for this day. He was confident that today was going to be a success. After all, he did have quite a bit of experience with women before he married.

"Hm, hm hm, hm hm."

She started humming in happiness. Ah, he hadn't heard this sound in a very long time. Just watching her hum to herself made him happy. For a few seconds, he stopped doing everything else other than listening to her sing. That melody... It's the one she sang when they first met. The one that she liked to sing whenever she was happy or sad.

[This is a happy and a sad song.]

He remembered now. When she told him that line, her face was colored with tears.

“Ah!”

She opened her eyes and immediately looked down in embarrassment.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What?”

“People are watching.”

Indeed, some people were watching the two of them with a smile on their faces. A loud hum like this in the middle of a quiet store was more than enough to garner some attention.

“I didn’t want to interrupt good music.”

“No... Ugh, whatever.”

“Thanks for the music. It was very good.”

“...You’re not going to get anything out of that praise, you know.”

“Doesn’t matter, I already listened to your music.”

Maru stood up first and pulled her chair back a little.

“Do you come to places like this often?”

“Mm, no.”

It wasn’t a lie. It was his first time coming to a pasta place in this life. Of course, before that, he used to come here with her often. As a matter of fact, their dates always involved a pasta place in them.

Right then, Maru was assaulted with so many memories that he started getting dizzy. When he grabbed his head and stumbled a little, she grabbed his arm with a surprised expression.

“W-what the. Are you okay? Are you sick?”

“It’s nothing. I just tripped a bit.”

“What, you surprised me.”

She calmed down pretty fast, Maru’s head went blank again. It looked like he could only remember fragments of his memories, not full ones. He grabbed the bill and walked over to the counter. The waiter asked them if the meal was good.

“It was delicious. We’ll come again,” she answered for him.

Maru handed his card over. He finished paying and turned around after grabbing the receipt. She immediately snatched the receipt out of his hand.

“...80 thousand?”

“Why?”

“Just pasta, pizza, and a drink?”

“Well, it’s good as long as it’s tasty.”

“No, but...”

Then again, at this time, for people of their age 80 thousand won was a lot of money. She stopped at the entrance for a second before taking out a little wallet from her bag. She swallowed nervously before fishing 40 thousand won from it.

“Here, here!”

She was handing it over with nervousness on her face. That was probably a massive chunk of her allowance. Maru refused for now, but she kept pushing the money onto his face. In the end, he took it.

“I wouldn’t have come here if I knew it was going to be this expensive.”

She was shaking her head dejectedly. Maru watched her walk outside for a second, before walking back to the counter.

“Can I borrow some pen and paper, please?”

* * *

The line into the theater was pretty long. It was a popular theater, so all of the seats were filled. She recalled that lots of people gathered here since the theater didn’t even have online ticketing to begin with.

“What did you do in the restaurant just now?”

“I asked for some tissues.”

“Ah.”

She nodded.

“It’s dark inside, so please walk slowly. Thank you.”

They entered the theater, following one of the actors. For a small theater, the distance between each seat was surprisingly large. The seats were very comfy, too. The stage only had a few pieces of furniture on it, lit up by an orange light as the setting for a romantic comedy. A lot of her friends said it was really good, so she had a huge expectation for it.

“You must like plays.”

“Of course!”

“That’s good.”

Again with that smile of his. She avoided Maru’s eyes and focused on the stage. Just now... she felt something flutter up in her chest.

‘No no, I’m just excited for the play!’

Right! She should just focus on the play. She looked at the stage intensely.

Chapter 92

A romantic comedy. The play entails the on and off relationships of two couples.

‘These are all couples.’

Most of the people in the audience seemed to be couples. As a matter of fact, the people right in front of them were holding hands as well. To the right of them and to the left of them, too. She started nervously stroking the wrist Maru was holding before.

“It’s about to begin.”

“Y-yeah.”

The orange lighting faded away, enveloping the stage in darkness. She loved the silence that took over the theater in these moments. In it, she could start imagining the adventure that was about to unfold in front of her. A moment later, light returned to the stage. The actors that were just silhouettes seconds before now became fully visible.

There was a tall man, and a woman a bit smaller than him standing on stage. They looked at each other exchanging a heated gaze, and then suddenly kiss...

Wow, that was a lot bolder than she expected. After the two actors kissed, they separated. The male actor was wearing a military uniform, he was probably off to finish his service. Thinking that, she looked next to her. She could see Maru looking at the stage with serious eyes. His smiling expression was completely gone, and his finger was constantly moving as if he was writing something with them. What’s he doing? She felt like she would create unnecessary misunderstandings if she stared, so she looked forward again.

‘We’re gonna never see each other after this play anyway, it’s going to be a bye bye.’

After the first couple disappeared, a college couple came on stage. The two were talking happily, but then the woman from before appeared behind the man. Then, she sneakily grabbed the man’s other hand.

“Cheating?”

“What the.”

Several of the audience members started complaining. She decided to join in as well. She started making a “boo” sound with a slightly low voice. Low enough to not interfere with the play.

“To think she couldn’t even wait two years,” she muttered.

A response came from right next to her.

“Are you going to wait for your boyfriend if he goes to the military?”

She nodded vigorously. She didn’t even need to think about the question to answer it. Waiting two years for her significant other was the least she could do for the person she loved.

“That’s a relief.”

“...Why would that be a relief for you?”

“The play’s continuing, let’s focus.”

The boy was surprisingly adept at changing topics. If she said something to him now, she’d be the rude one. She made up her mind to ignore Maru completely from now on and focused on the play. It was turning into a complete mess.

A woman waiting for her boyfriend in the military, who was also cheating with her best friend’s boyfriend. A woman secretly talking with a man who went to the military, while her boyfriend was cheating on her. Lastly, the man who was sending both of these women love letters from the military. The plot was really giving meaning to the title of the play, “Web of Love”.

She would’ve been uncomfortable watching if only one side was cheating. But since everyone was cheating on everyone else, she could watch it while thinking “damn all of you!” in her mind. She started getting more and more absorbed into the play.

* * *

“I think the person who wrote this play experienced a lot of loss. At least, that’s how I feel.”

“Or the person’s never dated before.”

She frowned upon hearing Maru’s reply.

“How? The person wrote such a realistic play.”

“It’s not like Tolkien wrote the Lord of The Rings after actually experiencing his adventure, it is the same with other stories. A lot of times, imagination trumps reality in terms of storytelling.”

“Well, fair enough. But I still want to say that the author of this play experienced a lot of loss before writing this.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s more fun to think about.”

“More fun, huh.”

Maru nodded.

“Hah!”

She exhaled a puff of air as soon as she stepped out of the theater. A white puff of air floated up to the sky in front of her. It almost felt like the weather got colder than the time they first met.

“Want anything warm?”

“Mm?”

Maru pointed at the convenience store in front of them and she agreed immediately. It was getting pretty cold for her, and she was already thirsty. She wanted to drink some warm coffee milk.

“I’ll pay this time.”

“Sure, do what you want.”

The rest of the audience were flocking over to the convenience store as well with similar trains of thought. She started speeding up a little bit when she realized all the people coming up behind them. She reached the glass door of the store, pushed it open, and shouted quietly to herself.

“First place!”

“You still like doing th...”

“What?”

Maru said something that she didn’t quite catch.

“It’s nothing.”

“I thought you said something.”

“You heard wrong.”

Maru walked right inside through the open door. She looked at Maru suspiciously for a second before walking up to the place with the hot drinks.

“There’s only soy milk here.”

“What did you want?”

“Coffee milk.”

“Coffee milk goes bad easily, they wouldn’t keep it somewhere warm.”

“Is that so...”

That was disappointing. She grabbed the canned coffee with a disappointed face.

“What about you?”

“I’ll get this.”

Maru was holding milk. Cold milk? In winter? For now, she took it. The counter was already booming with customers. She waited with coffee in one hand and milk in the other, but she kept bumping into people in the crowd. The employee behind the counter asked some of the customers to wait outside, but of course no one listened, since it was cold outside.

She put her arms close to her chest and focused on maintaining her balance for now. As she tried to maintain her position, she suddenly got pushed forward into the people by a person walking up behind her.

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

She quickly apologized to a woman glaring at her.

“Be careful.”

“Yes.”

She smiled awkwardly as she spoke. But just as she finished her words, she got bumped by someone behind her again. The thought of the woman getting angry with her immediately crossed her mind, so she tried to turn away as quickly as she could. Alas, she was late. The woman’s back was quickly getting bigger in her vision. But just as she was about to bump into the woman, she got stopped.

“Careful now.”

“...Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. It’s a bit crowded. Can you give us some space?”

Maru asked the people next to them politely. They all stepped back a little, giving them a little bit of breathing room. The people pushing in from outside stopped as well.

“Sometimes, talking does the trick.”

“...Thanks.”

Beep, beep. The employee scanned their items. She opened her wallet to pay.

‘Ah, right!’

She gave away her 40,000 won to Maru a while ago. All she had left was her bus card and 500 won.

“1,050 won, please.”

The employee stretched his hand out. Just before she could apologize, a 5,000 won appeared from right behind her. It was from Maru.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you. Here’s your change.”

“Could you give me a straw?”

“Yes.”

Maru stepped back with the drink and the straw, she followed him a little awkwardly.

“...I’ll pay you back some other time.”

“It’s fine.”

Maru walked over to the microwave. He opened the pack of milk and warmed it up.

“What are you doing?”

“You said you wanted coffee milk, didn’t you?”

Maru took out the warm milk when the microwave stopped, he took a small sip from it before pouring the coffee in. It looked like he did this several times before, seeing how natural he was.

“Do you drink like this a lot?”

“No, I used to make it a lot. There was a person who really liked this.”

“Really? Who?”

Maru didn't answer. Instead, he just smiled. Strangely, she couldn't smile herself when she looked at his smile. Instead, she actually felt a little ache in her heart. Why was his smile so melancholic?

“Here.”

Maru took the can of coffee and gave her the milk. She looked inside before taking a small sip.

“Wow.”

“Good, right?”

“This is nice. Tasty.”

The flavor brought a smile to her face. She took the warm milk and stepped outside. The warmth of the drink made the cold weather a little more bearable.

“So, what now?” Maru asked as if it was obvious that they would do something after this.

“Go home, obviously.”

“It's a Sunday, though?”

“Well, we saw that play, and I'm full. There's nothing more to do, so might as well go home.”

She gave Maru a short glance as she spoke, the boy wasn't even trying to hide his disappointment. She decided to try to ignore him as much as possible for now. She walked down to the subway station and arrived at the train platform. Maru followed her with such a dejected look on his face that she almost felt sorry for him.

“Hah. We can just watch a different play next time.”

She spoke without even realizing it. She immediately thought of the meaning behind her words and tried to fix it, but Maru was already smiling. But... his smile was kind of cheeky. Almost as if he intended this to happen.

“You, did you just...!”

“What?”

“On purpose!”

“I don't know what you're talking about. Anyway, that's a promise, right? We're coming here again?”

“Hey!”

She shouted in annoyance, but right then, Maru stepped right up to her. The height difference between them intimidated her a little bit.

“W-what the?”

“I'm going to take this back.”

Maru unwrapped the scarf from her neck as if it was the most natural thing to do, she froze up like a tree while Maru was taking it off. When he was this close, he seemed way more mature for some reason. He even looked old, for christ's sake. It was probably because he wasn't smiling right now.

- The next train is coming. Please step b...

The train arrived with a loud noise. She looked at Maru a little dumbly, as the boy put the scarf on his arm.

"Let's go."

Again, her arm got grabbed by his.

* * *

When she came back to her home, she jumped to her bed with a frustrated expression.

"He got me."

That laugh at the end! He totally got her.

"But..."

It wasn't bad. Actually, it was fun. It really was too bad that they didn't get much time to talk about that play. Next time, they should just eat after the play...

"Gaaaah!"

She jumped off of her bed. She was already planning their next meetup? Really?! That wasn't right.

"Wait. Is it really wrong?"

Now that she thought of it, he wasn't a bad person. He didn't do anything wrong either. They both acted, and he seemed to be pretty serious about it, too. He was well-mannered, kind, and kind of playful...

She shook her head. The boy was totally getting to her. Plus, thinking about all of his nice sides was making her feel like she lost. She pouted before changing. As she took off her coat and put it on the hanger, she felt something in her pocket. Something papery. When she took it out, she realized it was 40,000 won along with a piece of paper.

"....."

When did he put it in? Actually, now that she thought about it, Maru did walk pretty close up to her when he took that scarf off. He was smiling strangely back then, he probably put it during that moment.

The piece of paper had his number and his name on it. Also a line that read, "buy me something tasty next time". She looked at the money for a while before sighing and putting it back to her wallet.

After washing up, she came back to her room and turned on her computer. She opened her blog and wrote a simple post on it. Her blog was mostly for writing about things she felt over the years. As she wrote the article about that guy, she noticed the name of a particular visitor in her logs.

“Come to think of it, this person...”

That id, Maru.

There was no way, right? No way, no way.

She opened up the blog just to make sure. The blog’s posts were coming up almost daily, as per usual. She clicked on the most recent one.

“No way!”

* * *

“Mm?”

Maru noticed a new comment on his blog when he hit refresh. It’s only been ten seconds since he uploaded the post. So soon? He clicked on his post to read the comment. It was written by BlackSwan, his one blogging neighbor. The comment read...

- *You stalker!*

“What the?”

Well, that was a confusing comment. Right then, he got a text message on his phone. It read...

[Stalker!]

Chapter 93

The man opened his eyes with a fluttering chest. He has a date today, a date with a girl one year his junior, they were going to watch a play today. He chose a play since he heard recently that movies were getting a bit bland. Indeed, the girl seemed pretty happy with his decision when he told her about it.

He put on his nicest clothes and met the girl at the second exit of Hyehwa station. Despite it being winter, she came in pretty, nice clothing. Just looking at her was making him feel excited.

“What kind of a play is it?”

“Mm, an erotic romance?”

“Erotic?”

She wrapped her arm around his with a smile on her face. The two of them liked to exchange lewd jokes casually, so he could choose a play like this with no problem. They had a light meal before heading to the ‘Sky Theater’. This particular play debuted around a week ago but was already very popular. Since it was apparently good for an adult couple, he didn’t hesitate in buying tickets and handing them to the woman at the entrance.

“E14 and 15. You can head to the second floor. It’s fine to bring drinks for the play, but please refrain from eating food.”

They headed to the second floor where they had a view of the hundred seats in the theater. The lights on stage were constantly changing as if they were doing light checks.

“Oh, they must be the actors,” the girl pointed.

Two couples were standing on stage, talking to the audience. He probably should’ve gotten the front seats... Looking at the sight made him feel a bit of regret.

“Thank you for coming to see our play. We did notice recently that a lot of people were talking about it.”

“You guys all came by word of mouth, yes?”

The audience answered ‘yes’ at the actors’ question. The girl next to him answered quietly as well.

“Before we begin, we need to tell you a few things. First of all, you are very welcome to take photos of our amazingly handsome actors. But please refrain from doing so during the actual play. We will have a photo session after the play, so you can take your pictures then.”

The female actor left after speaking, a male actor with a deep voice spoke next.

“Excuse me, you aren’t going to eat that piece of bread now, are you? Of course, you can eat it, but we will take it from you if we see it during the play, so please be careful! We’d be grateful if you could eat after the play.”

The male actor left as well. Now, there was only a single couple left on the stage. The female one left after imploring everyone to, “Enjoy the play!”. The male actor was the only one left now.

“Before we begin, I wanted to introduce a young friend to all of you. We have exactly ten minutes before our actual play starts. Until that time, I would appreciate it if you could watch this friend’s solo play. He just started acting, so he might be a bit awkward, but please don’t think too badly of him.”

The last actor on stage left as well. The stage became dark. At the same time, a boy came out from the left side of the stage. He seemed to be in... high school, at best? The boy bowed to the audience on the first floor first, and then waved to the second floor next. The girl the man came with waved back happily.

“I wonder what he’s going to do?”

“Who knows.”

A spotlight turned on, lighting up the boy. He casually walked to the other end of the stage and dragged out a chair. He put it in the middle, and sat down. After a small breath, he closed his eyes and opened it again.

He stretched his hand out and pretended to hold something. Something circular. Perhaps the wheel of a car?

“He must be driving.”

“Yeah, seems like it.”

As the two of them expected, the boy started driving with a hum. He stepped on the invisible clutch and raised the gear of his vehicle.

“Hello. Yes, hello. A student? Yes, yes, grandmother. Oh, you should take the change. Yes, yes.”

The boy seemed to be a bus driver. As a matter of fact, the boy seemed like he had a lot of experience.

‘Though that’s impossible, of course,’ the man thought.

Experience driving a bus? From a boy too young to even get a license? In any case, the boy continued to hum as he drove.

“Where are you going, ma’am?”

The boy asked one of the women sitting right in front of him. The man peeked down to the first floor. The woman the boy was talking to seemed to have come with her daughter.

“Me?” the woman asked.

“Yes, customer. Who else is on this bus other than you right now? Where are you going?”

“Mm, oh my, stuff like this embarrasses me...”

When the woman hesitated, the daughter responded for her.

“We’re going to Busan.”

“Busan? This bus goes to Seoul, though.”

“Can’t you make an exception?”

The daughter was getting along well. The boy laughed and pretended to turn the bus around completely. His body leaned sideways due to the laws of inertia.

“The bus is turning. You guys know it’s dangerous to sit straight like that, right?”

Most of the audience in the first floor laughed at the boy’s words and leaned as well.

“We should join!” the girl said.

“Eh? Yeah.”

The man’s date clearly enjoyed participating, he leaned slightly to the left with her. The boy looked up to where they were before saying ‘How did you know this was a two-story bus?’ Half of the audience smiled at his comment.

“Busan, huh. It’s a nice place. It’s warm, and the sound of the ocean is very nice. Lots of men, lots of women, too. You must be going with your boyfriend?”

Despite the boy’s youthful face, he spoke like an old man. That smile of his, especially, made him seem more like an old man than a high schooler. The daughter awkwardly started glancing at her mother, unable to answer.

“Boo, there’s nothing wrong with dating someone. Isn’t that right, miss?”

“I’m not going to let my daughter date anyone short of Brad Pitt.”

“Wow! Brad Pitt? Then again, your daughter IS very pretty. Ah, we’ve arrived at Busan, I see. Please get off, the two of you.”

The boy stood up from his chair, and gestured for the two of them to get off.

“Please, I need to get the next customers in the bus.”

The daughter ran up to the stage, and ran back down again with embarrassment on her face. The boy clapped, making the rest of the audience follow suit.

“He’s good, not awkward at all,” the girl commented.

“Yeah.”

The boy sat back down on his chair and pretended to drive again.

“I’ll talk about myself, now.”

Background music started playing. A calm, slow one.

“You see, I got married. I had a beautiful wife, and I had a daughter who was more precious to me than anything else. Precious enough that it wouldn’t hurt even if I put her in my eye. I used to think ‘Why wouldn’t putting a human in your eye be painful’, but I understood when she was born. It really wouldn’t hurt even if I had to dig out a hole to fit my baby in.”

The boy smiled sadly, that smile made the man shudder a little. Not because it was scary, but because of how realistic it seemed. The girl holding his arm tightened her grip as well.

“One day, at dawn, I heard someone moaning in pain. I thought it might be my wife, but she was fast asleep. I realized who was moaning right then. I jumped up and opened the door to the small room, where our daughter was. She was curled up in the bed, shivering. I could quite literally feel my heart drop to the floor.”

The boy was looking forward, but he didn’t seem to be looking at the audience, his eyes wandered past the seats. The man got chills looking at this. The boy wasn’t cute at all, much unlike what the actor in the beginning said. He looked at the girl next to him. She was looking at the boy with a stiff expression, she was immersed with the act.

“I brought my kid to a hospital, I was never more thankful of the fact that there was a hospital next to my house. The place looked very foreign to me at dawn. The light hurt my eyes, and the oddly quiet building made me incredibly nervous.”

The boy sighed before continuing.

“Thankfully, my daughter had no problems. She actually recovered right away when she laid down on the hospital bed. That’s when I realized. Ahh, when this girl goes off to marry... I’m definitely going to be crying.”

The boy stepped on the breaks after turning a few times.

“This is the final stop. Thank you for listening to this old man’s boring story. There’s just one thing that I wanted to say today. The closer someone is to you, the more you should treat them with care. So that you don’t have any regrets when they suddenly leave your side.”

The boy smiled sadly again before standing up and bowing.

A short silence.

Then, applause.

“Wow, he was good.”

“I think so too.”

In that short ten minutes, the boy became a bus driver who was sharing his life story. Were all actors his age like this? It was quite amazing. The boy bowed again towards the first and the second floor.

“They say sweet things taste sweeter after tasting something bitter. The story that’s about to unfold in front of you is sweet, sour, and sometimes very refined and deep, like a fine wine. I wouldn’t be able to watch it, unfortunately. I’m not of age, after all. There isn’t anyone else that’s my age in the audience, are there? Remember, this play is meant for those who are 17 and above.”

The boy smiled lightly as the mood of the audience changed immediately. The dark stage became lit up with a bright pink and yellow light.

“Now! The main play, ‘That Autumn, Winter, and Summer’, will begin!”

The boy exited the stage promptly.

* * *

“An employee of a company last time, and now a bus driver?”

Ganghwan greeted Maru as the boy came backstage. He was dressed in a checkered shirt and jeans in accordance with his role of playing a college student that just returned from the military.

“Did I not fit the role?”

“No. The problem is that you fit the role too well. Most people do well acting characters that are around their age, but you strangely do better with the older roles.”

Maru flinched inside, but smiled externally.

“It’s good that you’re widening your spectrum, but focus on roles that fit your age for now. Why? That’s because you can act the role of a middle-aged man when you’re actually middle-aged. But having a middle-aged man act the role of a teenager is guaranteed to be strange to the audience. There are times for everything, so try to focus on the present if you can. Ah, I’m not trying to downplay your current work, of course. You did a great job out there.”

Ganghwan headed off to the stage with a thumbs up. On stage, Ganghwan was a completely different person, a college student who was still immature and had no sense at all. Maru watched the man act on stage from the side.

“Acting that fits my age.”

So he couldn’t fool a professional after all, Maru decided to act out the role of a teenager next.

Ganghwan was right. He needed to act out roles that best reflect upon his current age. Maru scanned the other actors, then turned back to the stage. He was used to standing there at this point. Every day

when school ended, he would come here to stand on stage. After all of it was over, he would usually come back at around 11 at night. Thankfully, his parents didn't seem so worried anymore. They seemed to have gotten used to his current schedule.

'How was I today?'

To be calm on the stage. In order to finish this homework that Ganghwan gave him, Maru tried to repress himself as much as possible on stage. He stopped his heart from getting excited and tried to think as much as possible. He tried to calculate every one of his movements on the stage.

"Phew, I should go now."

Hanna put on her lipstick as she winked at Maru. She was wearing pretty tight clothes, fitting for an erotic personality such as herself.

"Good luck."

"Of course."

Maru sat down on a chair and opened his notebook. It was time for him to go back to studying again.

Chapter 94

"How's the People of Dalseok-dong?"

It was an odd question, coming from a person who was laughing at a TV show while eating dinner. But Maru still answered the question without missing a beat.

"We've been doing run throughs and are focusing on stage details right now."

"How much does Miso engage herself in the play?"

"Not much anymore. She does seem to call people privately, though."

"Well, spending 4 months on a single play is a very long time, after all. By then, even beginners will have figured out what they're supposed to be doing."

Ganghwan finished his soup with a loud noise.

"So, the finals are starting in January, right?"

"Yes. I think that's what's making things so slow for us."

"Yeah. Miso definitely tried to rush things a bit for the December stuff. That extra month is just too big of a gap. Don't let go of your nervousness, though. The moment you do, you'll mess up the entire play."

Ganghwan tapped his head a few times with his finger.

"By the way, why are we at Myungdong...?" Maru asked, putting down his spoon.

It was a Sunday morning. If it were any other time, he would be busy doing puppet plays with Soojin, but today he decided to come here with Ganghwan.

"Why do you think?"

"I have no idea."

Ganghwan stood up with a grin. He paid for the meal and walked out with a toothpick in his mouth.

"Where are you going?"

"Follow me."

Ganghwan didn't tell Maru their destination often, neither was he fond of telling Maru what they were going to do. When they first went to the practice room in Anyang, he just told Maru to get in the car. As Maru followed Ganghwan on the road, he slowly realized where they were headed today. There was an old building in front of them, in the middle of the forest of buildings. A building filled with memories of the past.

Myungdong National Theater.

"National Theater?"

"No, it's an art theater now. They finished restoring it last month. They're performing the first play in this building today."

For whatever reason, Ganghwan started fixing up with clothes after throwing away his toothpick.

"You know, looking at that place makes me feel all respectful for no reason. It almost feels like I'm going to go meet my father-in-law."

"Have you ever met your father-in-law?"

"Of course not. I don't even have a girlfriend. It's just a figure of speech."

Right now, it was December of 2003. The building was bought by the Korean Tourism Board in 1998 from a finance company. According to Ganghwan, many actors and theater companies attempted to buy this building before the government made their move.

"It's been five years since the construction started, looks like they did a great job."

"The outside didn't change much though, right?"

"The base of the building is the same, after all. Most of their work was spent reinforcing the walls and stuff."

The first floor was filled with people looking around the theater, there were also a lot of people looking at the pamphlets with an excited look.

"Let's go down."

"Down?"

The two of them took the elevator down from the lobby. The first thing they saw as they stepped off of the elevator was a storehouse filled with costumes, they could hear a piano playing from somewhere as well.

"I'm here."

Ganghwan was entering the practice room of the Myungdong Art Theater. It was a bit small for a practice room, actually. It did have a mirror and everything, but the table on one side of the room made it a bit difficult to actually practice. Maru noticed a familiar face sitting at the table.

“Oh, you came empty-handed?”

It was Junmin. Next to him were two men in coats with a lot of pockets.

“Empty-handed? No way, I have a gift right here.”

Ganghwan pushed Maru forward after he spoke. Maru began with a greeting for now.

“Hello.”

“It’s been a while.”

“Yes, it has.”

Junmin held up his hand briefly, the two of them waited a few steps away from the table.

“Check the lights in row C again during the technical rehearsal.”

“Sure.”

“Take a look at the tape in the storage room as well. Apparently the labels became hard to read.”

“We’ll replace them.”

Junmin seemed to be talking to the stage technicians. In particular, he was talking to another elderly man around his age, with a younger person nearby frantically writing down notes. They were probably a student and teacher. The younger man looked very young, actually. Young enough to be a freshman at a college. He was either working in the industry at a very young age or just looked really young.

“There’s a generational change happening in this business as well,” Ganghwan whispered.

Plays. Plays sounded a lot more intimidating than normal movies. If movies are something you could just watch on any particular day, plays were there for special occasions. Maru assumed the rest of the general populace had similar thoughts. The numbers were more than enough proof as a matter of fact. Plays were not only more expensive than movies, they were harder to justify watching as well.

“That’s why the reopening of the Myungdong Art Theater is so meaningful. It’s the reopening of a building whose sole purpose is for plays. If this ends up going well, Myungdong will turn into a Mecca of art once again.”

Ganghwan smiled mysteriously. Despite being someone who often made very lighthearted jokes and some very dumb things, he wasn’t someone who could be taken so lightly. A dreamer. That’s what the man seemed like, at least to Maru.

‘A dreamer who turns their dreams into reality.’

In the future, this person would bring a top star known as Geunsoo back into the world of plays. Maru could somewhat remember the tickets at the time getting sold for up to 400 dollars at the time. His wife

pretty much sang about wanting to watch this play as well. He could remember the news at the time, too. About how all of the younger generations were starting to flock to theaters because of these two.

“This will go well.”

“Hah, that makes me pretty confident, actually.”

Ganghwan bumped Maru’s arm with a grin.

“I’ll leave it to you, then.”

“I’ll wait for you at the final checks.”

The two people at the table finished talking at this point. Ganghwan greeted the old man in the coat first. Maru followed suit.

“Ah, actor Yang, it’s been a while.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“I heard. You were missing for three months? You should really stop that kind of stuff. Stop making the people around you worry like that.”

“Yes. By the way, you’re planning on permanently moving here now?”

“Yes. The new equipment was way too tempting. It’s great over here, though. Come to the stage some time. The lighting and sound equipment is absolutely top-tier.”

“I can just take a look at it when I come to act.”

“Can you even do that? There are so many reservations here right now that even a team from Broadway would have to wait a full year.”

“It’s that bad?”

“Just means everyone was waiting for a very long time.”

The two of them shared a deep look before exchanging a short handshake. In the meantime, Maru exchanged greetings with the younger man from before.

“Ah, who’s this one, by the way?” the older man asked.

“A young sprout.”

“A sprout? Were you old enough to be growing one of those?”

“I’m old now, too.”

“If you’re old, then I’m already sitting in my grave. Ah, you should properly exchange greetings, then. You might meet each other in the future.”

The old man grabbed the young man and pulled him in, the young man looked at Maru in a slight daze. Maru waited for the man to extend his hand, but after receiving no response, he decided to extend his first. It was a little rude of him, but what could he do?

“Hello, I’m Han Maru.”

Only then did the young man grab Maru’s hand with a little “ah”.

“Hello, I’m Yoon Mintae.”

“Hey hey, Mintae. Why are you using both of your hands? You’re obviously older.”

The older man pulled Mintae back, making the man smile awkwardly.

“Anyway, I’ll see you later, actor Yang.”

“Yes, see you later.”

The two men disappeared with a curt farewell. Maru looked at the hand Mintae grabbed just now. It felt a little strange, almost as if they really were going to meet again, as the old man said.

“Hey, you two. Stop standing around in a daze and come over here.”

Junmin tapped at the table with his pen.

* * *

Bada changed her clothes before opening her brother’s room.

“He’s not here again.”

She stopped seeing her brother as of recently. He started coming back home past 11, and he went out in the morning on weekends. They lived together in one house and yet she hadn’t seen his face in close to three months. It was an odd feeling, to say the least.

Bada stepped inside and took out a book called ‘The Habits of Life’ from the bookshelf. She opened the middle, and found several 10,000 won bills inside it.

“Thanks, brother.”

- If you need money, just come here instead of going to mom. Just write down what you used the money for.

Bada smiled, recalling her brother’s angelic words at the time. Just a year ago, her brother was an evil incarnate. He would scream for snacks, and they would fight almost daily over the computer... They were rivals of the century at the time. But nowadays, her brother turned a completely new leaf. She used to be a little weirded out by this change, but she was used to it now. She even started bragging about her brother to her friends.

Bada took her money and wrote down “going around Myungdong with friends” on the post-it note inside. She returned the book to the bookshelf. Right then, her phone rang.

“Yeah, Hyeji?”

- We’re at the station. Come out!

“Yeah! I’m coming.”

She decided to go after hearing about lots of pretty clothing stores in Myungdong. This was her first time visiting the place, so she was a little bit excited. Before going outside, she opened her little wallet. She could see the money she collected for clothes, as well as the money she took from the bookshelf inside it.

'Mm.'

Maybe she should buy something for her brother, too. She'd have less money for clothes, but she wanted to give back to her brother at least a little bit.

"Myungdong, huh."

Bada ran towards the station with a grin on her face.

* * *

"Really?"

Changhu nodded at his disbelieving friend.

"Yeah. I asked big sis Gongsoon to come and she actually came."

"Wow, Changhu! You're talented!"

"You know I'm good at talking, it's all good as long as I say whatever she wants to hear."

"You think you can get her? Hm?"

"She's not that easy, unfortunately. She's fun to play with, though. She has a lot of money, too."

"Dang, people with money are the best."

Changhu stopped his friend from talking right then inside the PC bang, he put out his cigarette before taking the call.

"Ah, sis. Yeah. Of course, I'm free. Come over? Really? You're free today? Of course, I'm coming. You have friends? Can I bring mine? Yes, yes. You're paying? Wow! You're the best, big sis. I'm coming right now. Where should I go?"

Changhu turned off his phone after a long call.

"Yo, let's go to Myungdong."

"Why?"

"She's asking me to come. We might get lucky if we do well today."

"Us, too?"

"Of course, you're my bud!"

"Ya!"

The three of them walked out of the PC bang quickly.

Chapter 95

"I was very surprised when I heard about you from him."

Junmin turned to look at Maru after glancing at Ganghwan. It was a surprise, to be sure. He did expect something out of Maru, the boy had talent. But just a few weeks ago, he was a bit lacking compared to acting students his age.

'But his schedule honestly makes me want to tell him to take a break now.'

It wasn't like Maru wasn't studying, either. After all of his classes, he would go all the way to Anyang to study acting. Even on the weekends, he stuck around with Ganghwan to learn more. One could say Maru was just studying according to the money that was given to him, but Junmin could tell that Maru wasn't doing all of this just for the money. That energy coming from Maru right now... that was passion. Something that money can't buy.

"So you found your motivation, I see."

"I learned the joy of being on stage."

"Joy, huh. Good times."

Right now, joy should be enough.

'But what really makes people grow are trials.'

If Maru thought the stage was fun, it meant that Maru only saw the surface of what the stage truly was. As soon as the boy realizes what it really means to act professionally, and what it feels like when the character he's acting no longer speaks to him... Acting won't be a joy, it'll be nothing but a burden.

But then again, only the prodigies ever got that far. Junmin believed that the difficulty of this trial scaled directly with the actor's talent.

"So you were directing over here?" Maru asked, looking over the practice room one more time.

"It's the first play of the theater, ever. The older actors recommended the actors themselves, and we held an audition to screen them. After all, the older generation knows that it'd be better to let the young start taking over."

"You're saying the same thing as Coach, I see."

Ganghwan smiled upon hearing that, Junmin nodded. Creatures whose blood doesn't flow would die. For the creature that was acting to live on, it needed blood to continue flowing. Those above Junmin put a lot of work into restoring this theater. To blow life into it was the younger generation's task.

"You're doing a little monodrama before plays?"

"Yes."

"A script?"

"None. It's kind of like conversing with the audience, rather than an actual play."

As soon as Maru finished, Ganghwan jumped in.

“This kid is quite something, especially at acting the role of old men. It’s actually weird that he’s a high schooler.”

“I can understand that sentiment.”

Junmin didn’t know what kind of an environment Maru grew up in, but it couldn’t have been normal. To begin with, what kind of a high schooler would ask for 300 million won upfront? The boy clearly liked to bet when he knew he would win, almost like an experienced businessman on the negotiation table.

“By the way, why did you call me here today?”

“We decided to start a few programs with the opening.”

“Programs?”

“We’re trying to make plays a little more accessible. First, we’re starting off with tours of the backstage. Then, doing performances by amateur casts.”

There were a lot of ideas thrown around to spread the name of the Myungdong Art Theater, the most popular out of these turned out to be the backstage tour and the amateur performances.

“We’re going to select a few people to tour around, show them what the waiting room looks like, what the practice room and the actual backstage looks like, et cetera. Apparently these internet blogs are popular nowadays, right?”

“I know people do them, but I don’t know if they’re popular. Don’t most people use Cyland or something?”

“We’re both bad with this tech stuff, so I guess it’s inevitable we wouldn’t know. What do you think?”

Maru scratched his eyebrows for a second before responding.

“Well, I *am* running a blog...”

“Is that so? That’s good. Try posting a blog post as an experiment. Take some pictures, too. It’ll be a good reference.”

“Is it okay for me to do it?”

“It’s an experiment, so it’s fine. If the tour is successful, we’re planning on making it permanent.”

“I understand.”

Junmin wrote down what he just said in his notebook.

“Also, the reason why I called you two... No, you, is because of the amateur plays.”

“You aren’t planning on making him participate, are you?” Ganghwan butted in.

Junmin nodded without hesitation.

“He won’t have much time.”

“This is for people of all ages in all sorts of professions. The catchphrase being ‘plays for the masses’, after all.”

“Even office workers? Scheduling this is going to be a mess, in that case.”

“We’re not trying to make them perform a perfect play. We just want to show people that anyone can take up acting. We’ll start recruiting next February, and start training in March. Hopefully have them perform in May.”

“So the reason why you called Maru is...”

Ganghwan put a hand over Maru’s shoulder, Junmin shook his head.

“I can’t just put Maru in there, since we’ll have a public audition. But this is also a trial in the end, so all we need right now is to see what the general public thinks about this. For now, we decided to recruit those who are freer than others. That is, acting students around Seoul. We’ll create two crews, one for high school and one for college.”

“Gaah! No way! This kid is going to get to perform in Myungdong Theater faster than me? No! I’m dead against it! No way! I can’t be doing worse than my junior when I’m still coaching him!”

There was playfulness in Ganghwan’s voice.

“Stop making dumb jokes. Anyway, you should know why I called you here, right?”

“You’re not telling me to coach the high schoolers, are you?”

“Bingo.”

“I have a job.”

“But you’re very free.”

“If I focus on one play...”

“I heard news about sightings of you in Hongdae.”

“...I’ll work harder.”

“It’s going to be difficult during the weekdays anyway, so you’ll just have to handle the weekends.”

“But... If we only have one month to prepare, wouldn’t the resulting play be a mess?”

“Again, we aren’t too worried about how good of a play this will be. We’re just trying to get the general public to participate. Plus, this is just a trial session. The audience will be aware of that as well. Lastly, this will be paired with the backstage tour, so we shouldn’t get many complaints about the play. The producers for this event aren’t stupid, so don’t worry too much.”

Ganghwan wasn’t able to dispute Junmin at this point, so he just sighed. Ganghwan was someone who focused incredibly well when he found a play that he liked. But at the same time, he was easily distracted if he wasn’t interested. What made it worse was that the man only found interest in controversial plays.

'Hopefully he'll change. After all, he knows better than anyone that tragedy isn't everything in life.'

Ganghwan probably liked to act in these brutally real plays because he felt a need to portray reality. He might give softer, more relaxed plays a chance after satisfying himself to a point. The man was simply filled with talent, so he would easily be able to draw in a crowd at that point.

"So the fact I have to stick around with this kid doesn't change?"

"Not at all."

"I'll do it, then."

Ganghwan took up the offer immediately. Junmin turned to look at Maru.

"How much time would this take, for me?" Maru asked.

"We don't have anything set in stone, but at least half the day for both Saturday and Sunday."

"Wouldn't this be a problem with the winter competition coming up?"

"Let me ask you instead. Are the lessons you're taking difficult, at all? Enough for you to stay for the entire time?"

Maru thought for a second before shaking his head.

"Not really." "There's your answer, then. The winter competition is important for sure, but the opportunity to perform at the Myungdong Art Theater gives it a run for its money. Try to pace yourself, and see if you can succeed in both."

"I understand."

Maru gave in very fast as well. Ganghwan, who was too immature for his age, and Maru, who was too mature for his age... Indeed, it was a good idea to pair the two together.

'The two of them should be good influences for each other.'

Hopefully, they both take from each other's good sides.

"Ah! Right, senior!"

"Mm?"

"Did this kid really ask for 2 billion upfront?"

"He did."

"And you promised him 300 million won?"

"I didn't just promise him. I already gave the money."

Ganghwan immediately turned to glare at Maru.

"You."

"What?"

“Pay me back for lunch.”

As always, the man liked his immature jokes way too much. And...

“Here you go.”

The boy just seemed to go with it.

“Hahaha. What a great duo.”

Junmin smiled proudly.

* * *

“So this must be the path to the Myungdong Cathedral.”

“Wow.”

Bada took a look at the panel erected next to the uphill pathway. It had writings about the cathedral written on it, along with pictures from artists. The group slowly made their way uphill.

“Let’s take pictures.”

Even as they went back down, they took pictures. Bada took one herself, with the cathedral in the background. Unfortunately, the building didn’t fit that well on her camera screen.

“Where should we go next?”

The girls were excited at getting to play in Myungdong. Bada was no exception.

“I heard if you follow this path here, you’ll reach the Myungdong Art Theater. How about it? I heard it just opened, so we can go inside.”

“Theater? That sounds kind of boring.”

“Yeah, it’s boring. What about clothes shops instead?”

Bada stepped forward and started dragging her friends.

“Let’s go.”

Theater... She heard her brother talk about it a few times. He told her that theaters were fun places to visit. That they had a very different vibe compared to movie theaters.

“Well, if Bada wants to go, we should.”

“Let’s go.”

Bada’s three friends quickly changed their minds, and the group made their way down from the cathedral.

* * *

Soojin was nervous. She took a sip of coffee to try to calm herself, but it didn’t help.

Ah, maybe the caffeine would only make it worse?

She turned to look outside. She could see the Myungdong Art Theater, reborn with an outdoor stage. As she stared at the building, her phone vibrated with a new notification.

[Why don't you try talking now?]

A message, from her father. Today, Soojin made up her mind and decided to meet him. It's been ten years since she last went back home. She became independent upon graduating high school.

In reality, she was escaping. Out of apologetic feelings.

After fiddling around with her phone for a bit, she opened her phone. There was a call.

- We're almost here. We'll see you at that restaurant we used to go to.

It was her father. And...

- It's been ten years since you saw Dowook as well, hasn't it?

"...Yes."

- ...Right, I'll see you soon.

Soojin hung up and sighed. She was about to meet her brother after a full decade.

* * *

"Where are we meeting?"

"Myungdong cathedral, apparently?"

"Cathedral?"

"Dunno. She just told us to go there."

Changhu took his two friends and walked to the Myungdong cathedral. Just thinking about playing around with that dumb lady had him excited.

"Is she pretty?"

"Kind of."

"Good at drinking?"

"Dunno. I haven't seen her get drunk yet."

"I hope she goes out after just a shot."

"The fuck? Girls like that don't exist. She probably drinks more than you, bro."

"Ugh, I guess fucking's just a pipe dream at this point, then."

"Just drink, you stupid fuck. Is fucking the only thing you can think about?"

The three of them arrived at the cathedral in high spirits.

Chapter 96

"This is the makeup room and it's exclusive for the main characters of the play."

Ganghwan looked at the door of the room with both a jealous and nostalgic look on his face. Under the tag of the room, there was a name written "Kim Jiyeon".

"Someone you know?"

"Not at all. I was just wondering if I could ever enter one of these myself."

Right then, the door of the room opened and an actress walked out. Ganghwan and Maru flinched a bit before stepping back.

"Do you have business here?" the actress asked.

"We were just looking around. Were we being a bother?"

Ganghwan answered politely, the woman relaxed a bit after hearing Ganghwan's response.

"No, you weren't. Have we met before, by the way?"

"I'm just a no-name in the business."

"Is that so?"

The woman narrowed her eyes for a few seconds before exclaiming in surprise.

"Wait, could you be Mr. Yang Ganghwan?"

"You know me?"

"You are! I enjoyed your most recent play. Ah, perhaps that's not the right word for it."

The actress smiled before telling the two of them to wait a bit. She walked back into the makeup room and came back with a pen and paper.

"Could you give me your signature?"

"My signature?"

"Yes."

Maru saw Ganghwan's mouth curl up into a grin right there. Then again, there weren't many men that would be displeased from being asked for a signature from a pretty woman.

'A female lead at the reopening event... She's probably a rising star or something.'

The actress went back to her room with a smile after getting the signature.

"You should've asked for a number."

"...Maybe, yeah."

“Didn’t you say you didn’t even have a girlfriend? You have to pay attention to the small meetings like this if you really want to succeed.”

“Hah. I hate how I can’t even talk back to a high schooler right now.”

“By the way, was that lady someone popular?”

“In Hye-hwa, yeah. She left a government funded theater company for a private one.”

“Left a government funded company? Wow.”

What an amazing woman. Did she receive an offer better than a stable pay from the government? Or did she choose to challenge herself?

“Huh, I guess I would be pretty amazing, too, then?”

“What?”

“I was in a government funded one, too. Obviously, I got out. How is it? You feel that respect rising up inside of you yet?”

“...They don’t just pick anyone over there, do they?”

“Hey, stop looking at me like that.”

Maru smiled slightly. This was the first time he heard of this fact. So this person was sort of amazing, after all.

‘I guess that’s only to be expected from someone so popular in the future.’

Maru followed Ganghwan to look around some more at the Myungdong Art Theater. There were a lot of restricted areas, but they were allowed access with their staff name tags. They could even look at the top of the stage where all the lights were, with the help of the lighting crew. Apparently even the team didn’t like to frequent here because of how dangerous it was.

“This is pretty amazing.”

The ceiling of the stage was dotted with black rods, it almost looked like they made a spiderweb out of steel. The lights hanging off from this network of steel was what lit the stage below.

“The bigger the stage, the more effort an actor has to put in for a successful play. But the stage managers suffer just as much in that regard, you can’t just make a stage bigger just like that. You have to focus on how the lights hit the stage and making sure that everything is in complete coordination.”

Maru nodded. Even now, he could see many of the staff running around trying to fix the smaller things. Ganghwan noted that the staff didn’t just have to take care of the ceiling and the stage, but also the area under the stage, too.

“Whenever I look at this, I feel responsible. I feel like I shouldn’t make mistakes. Sure, not making mistakes is important for the audience, but I can’t ruin things for the many people that are trying to make this play a success. That’s why actors often like to come to the stage mid-production. Cheer on the

staff, while trying to keep themselves nervous. To actually engrave in themselves the fact that it's not just them that's trying to make this a success."

Ganghwan put a bit more strength into his words, the man's words resonated with Maru. These words weren't something born out of mere theory, but something that was dotted with experience.

"Let's go down."

"Where?"

"To eat."

"Again?"

"Again? It's already 3 o'clock. Three hours passed since our last meal. Also, senior Junmin's downstairs, so we might as well ask him for a free meal. Hmm... Beef, yes. Beef sounds good. Hehe."

What the hell happened to the cool guy from before? Maru shook his head as he followed behind Ganghwan jumping down the stairs.

* * *

"Hey, why aren't you coming?"

"Wait a second."

Changhu glared at his friends for a second before taking out his phone. It was 3 o'clock. Their meeting time.

"I got a call."

Changhu cleared his throat before taking the call, he had to pay particular attention to how he talked. These girls liked it when he acted cute.

"Yes, big sis."

- Sorry, Changhu. I told you the wrong place. The cathedral doesn't have any good restaurants nearby. Come to the Myungdong Art Theater. Do you know where that is?

"Myungdong Art Theater?"

- Yeah. It's pretty famous, so you can probably get directions if you ask around a bit. You're coming with friends, right?

"Yes. They're nice kids. Your friends are here, too?"

- Of course. Anyway, come quick. I'll pay for the meal. We can just go hang at a karaoke afterward. Karaoke during the day is super fun.

"Sure. Alright, we'll be right over."

Changhu spat on the floor as soon as he hung up.

"Hah, does this bitch think we're dumb dogs or something?"

“Why?”

“She’s telling us to go to the Myungdong Art Theater now.”

“Myungdong Art Theater? The hell is that?”

“Apparently we can just ask around for directions.”

“Really? Might as well go. I’m freezing my ass off. I should’ve worn more layers.”

“You idiot, why didn’t you bring a jacket or something?”

“I thought we’d go somewhere nice right away. Plus, thicker clothes make me look fucking fat.”

Changhu and his friends headed down from the cathedral, laughing amongst themselves. On the way down, they learned the whereabouts of the theater from an old lady.

“Yo, by the way, Seoul has a lot of pretty women,” one of Changhu’s friends said.

Changhu had to agree. There were a lot of women walking around in skirts even during the winter. Some even had tights on, too.

“Our town is kind of trash, dude.”

“If only we had girls like this.”

“Yo yo, dude, look at those breasts. That’s at least a C cup, isn’t it?”

“Isn’t it bigger?”

“Dunno. I’d have to sleep with her to know. Ah, you think I can lose it today?”

“Good luck. I don’t think you can do it though, you look too much like a baby.”

“You bastard, I’ll show you what a real casanova looks like.”

As the four of them walked, they eventually reached an odd building. It had loads of posters about acting taped to the wall.

“That must be it.”

The building just looked like a theater from the outside. Indeed, walking closer, they found that they were right.

“Over here.”

The group could hear someone call out to them from a bank on the other side. Changhu waved his hand towards where the voice came from.

“It’s them, what do you think?”

“Oh, hell yea.”

“I’m happy.”

“Dude, peach stockings are mine.”

Changhu explained to the others to call the women ‘big sis’, and to act cute in front of them.

“And then you can start to think about leading them on. Girls like that sort of stuff.”

“I know, I saw it on television.”

“No dude, theory is different from the real thing. Just watch how I do it before you try it. Trust me.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll let you play the king role today, Changhu.”

Changhu walked to the women with a smile, they all came out in pretty casual clothing. But the fact that these women were loaded and had nice bodies didn’t change. That alone made Changhu very happy.

“Hello, big sis.”

“We’re Changhu’s friends.”

Nice, they were going with the plan. Maybe Changhu shouldn’t even have bothered worrying so much.

“Are they really high schoolers?”

“Pretty nice looking for high schoolers.”

The other girls seemed pretty happy, too.

“Ladies, young men are always the best. Don’t you know that? Besides that, we’re cold. Are you going anywhere?”

“Oh dear, you were cold, Changhu? I’m sorry.”

“Buy us something tasty if you’re sorry.”

“Sure! I’ll pay. Does everyone like meat?”

The blonde woman smiled as she took out a card from her wallet. Changhu exchanged a quick look with his friends.

‘See? This girl’s rich.’

‘Nice.’

Changhu and his friends immediately dragged the girls over to a restaurant, they all stepped forward to grab the hands of the women they took a liking to. The women didn’t seem to hate it.

‘Good, good.’

It was time to drink.

* * *

“Why don’t you try having some shame for a change?”

“I know you’ll buy us food even if you say that, Senior.”

“You only take this senior’s word seriously when you’re asking for food.”

Junmin sighed in defeat before standing up. In the end, Ganghwan’s begging actually worked.

“Maru, I’ll let you have some nice meat today.”

Ganghwan proudly took the first step outside.

“He never changes, does he?”

“Never and not in the good sense, either.”

“How did you meet with Coach, sir?”

“Me and Ganghwan? It’s been a while. More than a decade now, actually. He was a college dropout that appeared out of nowhere asking to act at my theater company.”

“I... can sort of imagine that.”

“Whatever you’re imagining, it was even worse. He wouldn’t listen to any sort of sense or logic.”

“I did expect that to be the case, after hearing about him living homeless for three months. He’s pretty amazing, isn’t he?”

“Well, in that sense, you’re pretty odd as well. That 300 million... Use it well.”

Junmin pat Maru’s shoulder with a faint smile.

“Come on, walk faster, senior! The beggars in my stomach are about to start a coup d’etat!”

“Does he really want to act like that in his thirties?”

Junmin sped up his pace as he clicked his tongue, the three of them stepped into a little alleyway after coming out of the theater. According to Junmin, there was a pretty nice bbq place inside.

“I haven’t had beef in a while, I’m excited.”

“Can you not be so excited by stuff like that?”

The two of them were exchanging words like experienced comedians. An odd combo, for sure. Maru smiled faintly.

“Over here, right?”

Ganghwan asked as he looked up at the second floor, there was a massive signboard written “beef” on the building.

“This place is a restaurant and a butcher shop, all in one. It’s pretty cheap, but also delicious.”

“Whatever you say, Senior.”

Ganghwan headed up the stairs first.

* * *

"It was big, right?"

"Yeah."

Bada headed out of the Myungdong Art Theater with her friends. There was a little tour for what the backstage looked like before a play and they were lucky enough to join in. The theater from the inside was massive.

"They even had three floors for the audience."

"They had rooms on the left and right side, too. Probably for the VIPs, right?"

"I want to try watching from there, too."

Bada took a picture in front of the entrance with a grin. "Where should we go now?"

"What time is it?"

"3:20."

"Should we start exploring clothing shops now?"

Right then, one of Bada's friends raised her hand.

"Want to get some waffles before that?" she said, pointing at a store nearby.

Bada nodded vigorously. Just thinking about waffles made her mouth start to water.

* * *

"Dad, where are you going?"

"There's someone that wants to meet you."

"You've said that already. Who is it?"

Dowook followed behind his dad, who told him to stop asking so many questions. Just who were they going to meet?

"Ah, maybe we should buy some of that," dad said, looking at a waffle shop.

"You said we were going to eat something, though."

"Well, she likes waffles a lot."

"She?"

"Anyway, let's buy it. Don't you like waffles too?"

"...I got sick of it after eating it so many times."

Dowook immediately regretted what he said. Indeed, his dad's expression was darkening.

"I'm sorry. I should've paid attention."

"...Just buy it already. I'll eat the jam."

As he walked towards the waffle store with his dad, a group of middle school girls passed by him, laughing with each other.

"We should've moved a little faster," his dad commented.

After arriving at the store, Dowook ordered three waffles. Dad took out his wallet and handed the money.

"I'll make a call real quick."

Dad stepped outside. Just why did he keep having to leave to make the call? The man clearly wasn't talking to any of his gas station employees, judging from his expressions.

"Wow, he's handsome."

"Shh, he'll hear you."

Dowook turned around, making the middle school girls turn away with a flinch. Dowook quickly turned back awkwardly to look at a mirror on the wall. Wow, he looked like a delinquent.

"Oh yeah, I saw your brother," he heard one of the girls say.

"Bada's brother? Ah, Maru?"

'Maru?'

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Bada's eyes met with that of the scary person in the waffle shop.

'Whoa...'

So that must be what delinquents look like. Bada was pretty headstrong back in school, but this time, she had to avert her gaze.

"I wonder if he heard us."

"He's still looking at us."

"I told you to speak quietly."

Her friends lowered their voices as well, at least the man couldn't do anything to them in the store.

"Here you go, your waffles are out."

The employee handed them a paper bag. Bada took it and quickly walked outside. After the group exit the store, they quickly moved as far away as they could.

* * *

"My god."

Did he look like he was gonna bite them or something? Those girls were looking at him like a hoodlum. Then again, his eyes did look pretty fierce, what with them being stretched out so wide. It was something he inherited from his mother.

“Here’s your waffle.”

Dowook took the waffle and stepped outside, his dad was waiting after finishing the call.

“She’s at that cafe over there.”

“Who is it?”

“Let’s go.”

Dowook noticed an awkward smile from his dad. Just who was it? His relationship with his dad improved recently thanks to Maru. As a matter of fact, they were even going on fishing trips quite a bit. They didn’t talk much, but that was fine. Dowook didn’t expect a ten-year gap between them to be closed so quickly.

‘I guess that’s why I can understand him not talking to me about this.’

Dowook stepped forward, following his dad into the cafe.

* * *

“So this is what it looks like when you eat normally.”

Ganghwan grabbed a piece of beef, put it in his mouth, and chewed.

“But sometimes, people eat like this, saying that they’re just trying to act.”

Ganghwan dramatically picked up a piece. His elbow was pointing to the sky, making him look very uncomfortable. He looked at the meat he picked up for a brief moment before putting it in his mouth. The highlight was him letting out a loud “mm” as he chewed loudly.

“No way,” Maru said, eating a piece of meat himself.

“Doesn’t seem real, does it? But there are actually a lot of people who act like this. Help me out here, Senior.”

“There’s a lot of those, yes.”

Junmin took a sip from his shot of soju, Maru thought that was an amazing feat in itself. The man was already taking his sixth sip from his tiny glass.

“People act awkwardly when they’re incredibly nervous. Like in the military... you wouldn’t know since you’re still too young, but people turn into idiots as soon as they step into foreign territory.”

“I see what you mean.”

Junmin’s words came to him very easily, he’d seen many people who act incredibly strangely in the military as well.

“See my ass. Say that after you go,” Ganghwan laughed.

“In any case, actors have to work from an uncomfortable position. They have to keep in mind how they act, but when they become too aware of their actions, they can’t act well. But if they try to act too

casually, they make simple mistakes. They need to control themselves, and at the same time try to act naturally. It's a strange profession."

"How are you at doing that, Coach?"

"Me? I'm... just a noob, really."

Honestly, Maru thought that at Ganghwan's level, it would be okay to not try so hard. After all, the man was skilled enough to act in a play with his name on it and receive good reviews. That was no small feat.

'In that sense, Junmin is...'

Maru turned to look at Junmin. This man in his fifties was pretty well-known throughout all of the industry. As a matter of fact, the man was even directing the first ever play of the Myungdong Art Center. In the world of acting, Junmin was a colossus.

"If you're a noob, then I might as well stop calling myself an actor altogether," Junmin said with a smile.

"Oh, come on, Senior. Well, I guess I'm a bit better at acting than you."

Ganghwan easily said words you could only say to a good friend, Junmin took those words in stride as well. The two very clearly had a very good relationship.

"I am better than a no-name actor, for sure. I used to dream of starring in a play myself, but I'm doing something completely different nowadays. I don't regret the decisions I made, but I do like to think of the 'what ifs' often."

"Call me anytime you want when you want to act, I can easily give you a role as something like villager 1."

As Ganghwan filled Junmin's shot glass with a smile, Maru flipped the meat in the meantime so that it wouldn't burn on the grill.

"You should try to learn a lot from Ganghwan. He likes to say silly things, but he's very talented in terms of acting."

"Yes."

Right then, Junmin grabbed his phone and stood up. After saying a few words, he gave Ganghwan a few glances.

"Stay here for a bit. We'll be back real quick."

The two of them left the table for a bit. Maru thought back to the conversation they just had and started filtering it for useful information. As a forty-five year old man, Maru couldn't agree completely with what the two men had just said. As he organized his thoughts, he could hear a loud noise come from behind him. Voices of several men and women were making the restaurant get louder, ruining the peaceful meal Maru had until now.

"Big sis is paying!"

"Ohh! You're the best, sis!"

“Can we order, please?!”

The group headed into a private room. Maru chose to ignore them as he continued grilling.

* * *

“Hold on, is that Maru?”

“Oh, it is.”

One of Changhu’s friends pointed towards the hall. The group could see Maru grilling by himself on a circular table.

“What a pleasant surprise.”

As they watched, an older man wearing a hat and a younger man sat down next to Maru.

“Is that his dad?”

“Probably.”

Changhu stared at Maru’s back for a while before nudging his friends with a grin.

“Yo, let’s go earn some cash.”

“Cash?”

His friends quickly caught onto what Changhu was talking about.

“Sis, we’ll be back real quick. We’re going to chat with a friend.”

“Friend?”

“Yeah, that guy over there. We’ll be back quick.”

Changhu walked towards Maru with his friends and tapped Maru’s back in a friendly manner. “Maru.”

The boy had been pretty rebellious in the beginning, but he was docile now. Maru turned back to look at Changhu.

“Yeah.”

The boy didn’t look very surprised. Changhu was very dissatisfied with Maru’s expression, but he decided to carry on with a smile on his face.

“Hello, we’re Maru’s friends.”

The older man nodded quietly, and the other one greeted them with a smile.

“Oh, right Maru. I wanted to talk to you about something. Excuse me, we’ll talk to Maru real quick.”

He pushed Maru’s shoulder a little violently as he spoke, in an angle where the adults wouldn’t notice. Maru stood up after putting down his chopsticks.

“I’ll be back quick.”

It was nice that he was being so docile. Changhu headed to the bathroom outside the building with a smile on his face. He made Maru stand near the urinals as he surrounded the boy with his friends.

“Heey, Maru. It’s nice to see you outside.”

“We’re not that good of friends, but I’m glad you’re so excited about seeing me.”

“Hah, you like to speak pretty words, don’t you?”

Changhu slapped Maru’s cheeks lightly with the back of his hand, the boy seemed to have feelings of rebelliousness in his heart. These types tried to hit back when you brutally stepped on them. You had to slowly bully them into submission. Maru grabbed Changhu’s hand and slowly put it down, making Changhu smile.

“Maru, we’re friends, right?”

“Let’s say we are. What do you want?”

“Hah, you like to get to the point, as usual. You’re a great friend for sure. So, the thing is... We don’t have cash. You saw just now, didn’t you? We came with some pretty girls, but we don’t have any cash. The girls have money, but we have to save face, man. We just need enough money to at least buy dessert.”

Changhu sent glances at his friends. One of them blocked the door, and two of them stepped closer to Maru.

“We’re really good friends, so I’ll say this now. Lend us some money. You know that’d be best for you, right? You don’t want the adults outside worrying about you, do you?”

Changhu tapped Maru’s cheeks one more time. He was ready to punch Maru in his stomach if the boy refused him. Changhu was a fan of beating that spot because it was hard to see. Maru scratched his eyebrow calmly.

“So, how much do you need?”

Bingo.

“We’re friends, so I don’t want to take too much. I think just... 100 thousand is enough?”

“100 thousand won?”

“Yeah. That’s easy enough to get, isn’t it?”

“Hm, 100 thousand, huh.”

Maru muttered to himself as he took out his wallet. Changhu had to let out a whistle a little when he saw the contents.

‘...The hell is this kid?’

He could see several checks inside. Next to those was a thick stack of 10,000 won bills.

“You’re rich, aren’t you?”

“Sure. Anyway, we’re friends, so I’ll keep it pretty cheap, too. 10% interest, to be paid out in 10 daily installments. 11,000 won every day. Not bad, right?”

Changhu stared at Maru dumbly. What the hell was the guy talking about? 10%? Daily installments? What?

“Hey, this is cheap, you know. Normally you’d have to pay 20%, but I’m keeping it cheap because we’re friends.”

A small smile appeared on Maru’s face, the boy was handing Changhu a white check.

“You’re not taking it?”

“What?”

“If you don’t want it, sure.”

Changhu was rendered speechless for a second. Maru didn’t seem normal just now, either. But Changhu soon returned to his senses and pushed Maru back with gritted teeth.

“You bastard!”

Right then, Maru quickly dodged and grabbed Changhu’s wrist. The boy twisted his wrist, making Changhu shout in pain.

“Why can’t you just stick with one thing? If you want to play with money, go for that. If you want to bully people, just stick to that. Stop trying to confuse me by doing both. Also, stop acting so childish. If you need money, just ask for it. I’ll take an interest, but I can easily lend it to you. We’re friends, after all, right?”

“Ouch! Ouch! Fuck! Let go!”

“Stop shouting, you’re going to attract people.”

Maru let go of Changhu’s hand like he was throwing away a piece of trash. Changhu glared at his friends, but they were flinching in a bit of fear.

“Take this.”

Maru handed his money to a friend nearby.

“I don’t need interest, so just pay me back in due time. Also, let’s not try to ruin our relationship, yeah? I’d like to be on decent terms with you all as well.”

Maru headed out of the bathroom.

“Fuck, damn it.”

Changhu swore as he caressed his wrist.

* * *

“What happened?”

“They were asking for money.”

Maru came back and immediately started grilling again. There was quite a bit of burnt meat on the grill. Clearly, the other two men didn't care for the food.

“So why are they glaring at you?”

Ganghwan asked, looking at the private room behind them. Maru told him it was nothing. He didn't want to explain something so childish.

“Are you being bullied?”

“You realized just now? I'm a pretty famous victim.”

Maru casually continued cooking. The other two men smiled slightly before continuing their conversation.

‘Daily installments...’

The word brought back memories from his road manager days. That's when he realized how many bullies there were in the entertainment business and how many poor actors wasted their lives away under them. He even met a person who lived solely off of giving loans with daily installments.

‘Maybe that's why I stopped working in that industry. Because I got sick of seeing that.’

Maru put down his chopsticks slowly before asking a question.

“I heard there were those in entertainment companies who liked to bully people with violence.”

“Of course. There's trash no matter where you go.”

Junmin answered casually.

“Why do you ask, though?”

“I just thought of it.”

“It's an unfortunate thing. Having your passions taken advantage of is one thing, but to be beaten up at the same time.”

Maru nodded before grabbing his chopsticks again.

“You aren't asking why I'm not helping them?”

“People would've already helped them if they could be helped. The fact that no one's helping them just tells me the mess they got themselves in goes very deep.”

“I keep saying this, but you're brutally realistic.”

“That just makes life easier.”

“I still don't quite understand you.”

“I just try to do some good where I can.”

“God damn, are you really a teenager?” Ganghwan asked, putting Maru in a headlock.

Maru didn't answer that question.

Chapter 98

Changhu glared at Maru, still caressing his aching wrist. He'd never felt this humiliated in his life.

“Is your wrist okay?”

“It's nothing. I was just surprised. Fucker's trying to act cool.”

He felt incredibly annoyed, but he still smiled in front of the girls. He could just step on Maru later. He was here to play, so he wanted to do just that for now.

“I'll just kill him later.”

“Sounds fun.”

His friends started smiling as well.

“What happened?” The girls asked, as soon as they entered.

Changhu said it was nothing special and started grilling the meat.

“You guys want to drink?”

“Of course.”

The sis raised her hand to call for an employee. A woman in her early twenties entered. Probably a part timer?

“Hey sis, can you get us four bottles of soju, and shot glasses for everyone here?”

“What? Everyone?”

“Damn it, can't you listen? Four bottles of soju, shot glasses for everyone. Okay?”

“Um, excuse me, but these people look underage?”

“Underage my ass. They're grown boys, so just bring on the alcohol, sis.”

Changhu sent a wink to his big sis. She was a great person to have on his side, for sure.

“Um, excuse me, can I check your id...?”

The part timer turned to Changhu and his friends. Changhu swore under his breath in annoyance. Hearing that, the part timer stiffened a little bit.

“Changhu, sis'll handle it.”

“Sis, you're too kind. You need to be more tough on the businesses that take light of their customers.”

“I know, I know. I'm too kind. So, Ms. Part timer? Why don't you bring the booze while I'm still being nice?”

“.....”

“Fuck, whatever! Just bring four bottles of soju and four shot glasses! You think we’re a total fucking joke, don’t you?”

“N-no, I don’t.”

“Then why can’t you just bring it when we tell you to, you fucker? You think you’re the boss of this place or something? Huh?”

“...No, I don’t.”

“Bring it over, then. What the hell’s wrong with you?”

Changhu gave his friends a little glance, and they all started clapping in unison. The big sis flipped her hair back, as if what she did wasn’t anything special.

* * *

The voices from the room were heard by everyone in the hallway, making the rest of the customers shake their heads.

“They don’t seem to be your friends,” Junmin commented.

“They’re delinquents.”

“Wait, are you actually getting bullied right now? Isn’t this bad?”

“I’m not dumb enough to get bullied by them.”

“Well, that’s a relief. But man, kids nowadays are scary.”

Right then, they could hear one of the women inside screech. She was screaming at the part timer to bring the alcohol, and the part timer stepped outside with a pale face.

“Those uncultured motherf...”

Ganghwan stood up. This was not good. To begin with, Maru gave Changhu’s group money to keep them quiet. The time he was spending with these two people was valuable. Having that time wasted by delinquents wouldn’t be good, so he gave them money, but... the real problem turned out to be the girls that they came with.

‘Likes attract likes, huh.’

That saying never felt truer to him than now.

“I’ll go have a word with them.”

Just as Maru was about to stand up, Ganghwan pushed down his shoulder.

“No, these kinds of idiots only listen when you go wild. Senior, I’ll be back in a bit. I’m not much of an upstanding citizen myself, but at least I don’t act like trash to business owners.”

Junmin stopped Ganghwan from leaving himself.

“Don’t try to start trouble. Getting mad so easily isn’t a good attitude to have.”

“But, as a person...”

“You’d start a fight as soon as you head over, I just know it. That’d be worse for the business owner. I know the man somewhat, so I don’t want to trouble him. Just watch. I’m sure the owner has his way of dealing with this.”

“You’re way too cold about this kind of stuff, Senior.”

“I’m simply choosing the path of least resistance. So just eat. The meat’s about to burn.”

Maru nodded. He agreed with the way Junmin handled this. It was fine to get yourself involved in a situation like this, but you couldn’t let yourself be affected so much by your own emotions. Besides, this was a business. If you worsened the mood of the restaurant by starting a fight, you’d only be putting the owner in more trouble. Junmin said he knew the owner, that was probably what made him so calm.

“Well, if you say so.”

Ganghwan sat back down after glaring at the room for a second. After a bit of time, the restaurant became quiet again. The room was still pretty loud, but since they were just laughing amongst themselves, it was fairly easy to ignore.

“Here you go, some plum tea.”

“Oh, you didn’t have to.”

A man who seemed to be in his mid-40s brought out a pot of plum tea for them. Probably the owner, by the looks of things.

“You’re a regular, this is the least I can do. Please come again.”

The owner left after a short greeting. Maru took a sip of the tea. It was a blend of slightly sweet and sour. Delicious.

“This is good.”

Ganghwan seemed to be a fan as well.

“The meat’s good here, but this is honestly the real reason why I come here,” Junmin mentioned with a smile.

Maru listened to the man talk about the Myungdong Art Theater after the meal was over. After a bit of time, four girls and four boys stepped out of the private room near them. Maru could feel Changhu glaring at him, but paid him no mind. The owner stepped out to handle the bill. Probably because the man knew that this wasn’t going to be easy.

But then.

“Even if you say that...”

The owner was speaking in a troubled voice. What happened? Maru turned around with a curious look. The four girls were standing in the back, while the four boys were saying something to the owner.

“Those...”

Ganghwan got angry again, Maru stood up too. This time, he didn't want to stand back. These people were just continuing to eat away at his precious time one way or the other.

“They really don't like listening to words, do they?”

Even Junmin started walking to the counter. For now, Maru decided to watch what the man would do.

“What's wrong?” Junmin asked.

The owner smiled awkwardly, saying it was nothing special. Maru looked at the owner, Changhu's confident expression, and the amused girls at the back before realizing something.

“Were they saying something about selling alcohol to underaged kids?”

Right then, Changhu and his friends started glaring at him. Bingo. The owner waved his hands as if that wasn't the case, but the man's gestures looked too unnatural.

‘Well, this is pretty obvious.’

Maru knew very well that there were many high schoolers that enjoyed screwing over restaurants like this. In Korea, only restaurants ever got punished for stuff like this. If a restaurant that sold alcohol to underaged people were to get caught, they had to pay a fine. If it was a repeat offense, they would just get shut down entirely. Just a single report was a critical hit to these restaurants as a result.

Maru turned to look at the girls, they were still looking at this with amused expressions. What idiots. If they had anything left in their heads, they wouldn't even have thought about doing this. To think they'd act like this even after turning into adults...

‘They're the type that'll try to play this off as a joke if things go wrong.’

Right then, Junmin opened his phone and made a call somewhere. It was something about having lunch, but the contents of the call seemed pretty interesting.

“Ah, yes, lawyer Kim, lawyer Lee. I'll see you here. There's something interesting going on. Ah, you have a customer as well? Haha, bring him over! This is a nice place, and this just sounds like a great opportunity to expand your networks. Yes, yes, I'll see you soon.”

Junmin loudly closed his folder phone, Maru shook his head silently.

‘Man, this guy.’

The man knew very well what it was like to crush people with status. Indeed, as soon as he put the word ‘lawyer’ in his mouth, the group of eight all turned completely pale.

‘He's a great person to have on your side, for sure.’

In his previous life, Maru was always on the receiving end. But in this life, Maru had a very, very powerful man by his side. Life was quite strange, indeed.

“Well, would you like to wait a little, or?”

As soon as Junmin finished, one of the women quickly took out her card.

“We’re not involved in this at all, this kid was just trying to show off. We were going to pay from the start. There’s no problem, right?”

“Did I ask?”

The woman turned bright pink, the owner quickly took the card and processed the bill. The four girls glared at Changhu and his friends before leaving first.

“S-sis.”

“Take us with you.”

And with that, the group of eight were all out of the building.

“Thank you for helping, sir.”

“This is a good restaurant. I’d rather not see any bad things happen to it. Ah, could I get some plum tea for the guests coming for dinner as well?”

“Of course. But didn’t you say they would come now...?”

“Oh, that? I was lying.”

“I-is that so? Ha, hahaha.”

The owner laughed. Maru couldn’t help but laugh a bit as well.

“What would you have done if they didn’t leave?” Ganghwan asked, sighing in relief.

Junmin answered with a very calm look on his face.

“Well, I could just make them show up a bit early for dinner, then.”

“What? Then those people you mentioned... were they real?”

“You get into a lot of trouble in this business. Plus, there’s nothing wrong with getting on the good side of a law firm.”

“So that thing just now...”

“Apparently a pretty famous person just joined their law firm. They wanted me to join them for dinner.”

“Wow, Senior. It’s like you live in a different world compared to me.”

“Is that so?”

“Can you help me out if I get into trouble in the future?”

Ganghwan got out of the restaurant with a grin.

“Hey,” Junmin called out to Maru, “was my acting all right just then?”

“Haha, I couldn’t believe you used to be a no-name actor.”

“Right?”

Junmin smiled proudly.

* * *

“Ah, fuck off. So annoying.”

Changhu grit his teeth as he saw the girls leave.

“Ah, fuck.”

“Dude, Changhu, didn’t you say this would work?”

“This usually works. It was about to, since the owner looked dumb as shit, but they had to intervene...”

Changhu was more annoyed at Maru than anyone else right now. If that kid wasn’t here, his night would be a lot more fun right now

“So, what now?”

“What do you mean, what now? We don’t even have cash, so we might as well go home.”

Right then, one of the friends smiled as he raised his hand.

“Yo, we got cash. Remember Maru?”

The boy fished out 100 thousand won as he spoke. Changhu smiled bitterly as he grabbed the bills.

“Want to go play billiard?”

“Let’s go to karaoke instead. Billiard fucking sucks if you go to the wrong place.”

“That’s true. Let’s just go wherever, then. We can have some drinks afterwards.”

“Sure.”

Changhu looked around for a second before trying to find a karaoke bar.

* * *

Dowook finally understood why his dad was being so awkward all this time.

“.....”

He looked at the woman in front of him, who was just looking straight down at the floor all this time. It was Kang Soojin, his sister. The sister that he hadn’t seen in a decade. His dad coughed nervously. Dowook sat down, biting down on one side of his cheek. His sister was still looking at the floor.

“Soojin, Dowook.”

He could hear his dad say something in the background, but he didn’t really understand anything the man was saying. Dowook ignored his dad and said something to his sister. Really, he just spat it out.

“You make me sick.”

Soojin flinched.

“So, you’ve been talking with dad all this time.”

“.....”

“I’m leaving, dad.”

Dowook stood up instantaneously, He felt disgusted with annoyance. He could hear his dad call out to him, but he didn’t stop.

Dowook grit his teeth in anger.

* * *

“This is too expensive.”

“Too late, you bought it. Also, it’s pretty.”

Bada held up her shopping bag with a smile. She managed to buy some nice clothes, and a present for her brother as well within her budget.

“Where to, now?”

“My legs hurt after walking so much.”

“Should we rest somewhere, then?”

“Rest my ass! Karaoke! Gogo!”

One of the more energetic friends immediately walked forward. Bada shook her head as she followed her friend.

“I saw a place that does student discounts near the theater. We should go there.”

“Okay.”

That’s good. She was running kind of low at this point, too. Bada walked as she started thinking about which songs she wanted to sing.

Chapter 99

As the group of girls walked to a karaoke bar, they started hearing swears coming from somewhere behind them.

“Hey hey, don’t look back. There are some weird people behind us.”

Bada nodded. This was a foreign town for her, she didn’t know what kind of people lived here. In the past, she once got hit by a lady just because their eyes met. She remembered going back home crying at the time, and her brother ran outside shouting in anger.

‘He was really impatient back then.’

Just a year ago, her brother was a very selfish villain, but he’s changed a lot since then. Almost a different person now. Honestly, that was the only reason why she bought him a gift today. Bada looked

down at her bag. There was a pair of shoes she bought for her brother. She noticed how he still wore those shoes of his that were turning into rags at this point. Even when mom said he should buy a new one, he said he'd only do that when the soles fell out.

'The way he spent money changed, too.'

Her brother, who used to beg for expensive shoes and clothes, started buying clothes from cheap stores. Even when she went to Dongdaemun market with her brother, he grabbed a piece of clothing from a street seller saying "this stuff looks durable". He really looked like an old man back then. Especially since the clothing he picked out looked like hiking clothes that their dad liked to wear. Do all men turn into dads or something as they age?

'Hold on, was his shoe size 270? I don't remember.'

She checked this morning for sure, but she couldn't remember all that well. So she just decided to pick a decent one.

"God damn it, if it wasn't for that bastard..."

"It's okay, we can just beat him up some other time."

They could hear swears from behind them again.

"Aren't they embarrassed?"

"Yeah. I guess guys think they look cool when they act like that."

Her friends laughed amongst themselves quietly, they had boys like this in their classes as well. The kids that liked to swear day in and day out. Bada swore too, but not in public like this.

"Let's leave."

Bada pushed her friends' backs, she wanted to sit down somewhere. Her friend pointed to a building with a sign on it. Ah, student discount, there it was. That must be the place.

"Han Maru, that fucking son of a bitch."

Just as she was about to enter, she heard someone swear again. Bada flinched. That was her brother's name. She tried to ignore it and go inside, but alas, she already looked back.

"What?"

There were four boys behind her. They didn't look very mean or anything. Somewhat handsome, actually. But judging from the way they spoke earlier, they probably didn't have great personalities.

"What are you looking at?"

The boy at the front glared, Bada turned around to get on her way. She was a bit afraid. If she got away here, she'd probably be able to get away with hearing a few bad words. Her friends were trying to pull her away as well. Bada nodded and started stepping down the stairs.

"Wow, what a fucking day. First Maru, and now some little brats are glaring at us?"

Again, her brother's name. If it was a year ago, Bada would've stepped down without thinking another thing. But right now, she wanted to do something. Of course, these boys might not be talking about her brother. Han Maru wasn't a common name, but there could always be others of the same name, after all. The reason why she was annoyed regardless was because of how kind her brother's been to her in the past year. Bada glared at the boys behind her with a frown. She didn't want to pick a fight, but she felt like glaring was warranted.

"Oh?"

The boy in the front grabbed her left arm with an annoyed look. Bada tried to pull away, but the boy dragged her outside anyway.

"Bada!!"

"Let go of her!!"

For a moment, Bada was proud of having such good friends. She was in danger, but they were trying to help her regardless. Thanks to that, she didn't feel so scared. As a matter of fact, the boys in front of her almost looked comical.

"You bitches. Did we beat you up or something? What are you shouting for?"

The boy who grabbed Bada shouted. Bada's friends closed their mouths but didn't leave Bada.

"Let go," Bada said.

The boy didn't let go.

"Why did you glare?"

"Because you kept swearing behind us. So what!"

"What the hell does this bitch think she is?"

The boy raised his other hand at her. Bada flinched but didn't close her eyes. She was Han Bada, you know! The one girl who even got into fistfights with boys! The boy who was holding her frowned even deeper. Bada could feel her body get pulled forward right then. The boy was tugging her violently towards him.

Bada didn't fall, but the paper bag in her hand ripped from the sudden shock. The clothes and shoes she bought rolled all over the floor.

"You!"

Bada felt anger rise straight up to her head, the present she bought for her brother was getting dirtied to bits.

"You? How cute. Do you really have a death wish?"

The boy raised his hand, this time with the intent to actually hit her. Bada jumped forward in anger, she'd fought with her brother multiple times. She could handle this. Thinking that, she headbutted the boy's stomach. Bada fell on the floor, and the boy fell back on his butt.

“B-bada!” he

Her friends helped her up immediately. Bada got up, still huffing. The fear in her head completely disappeared after she actually attacked him.

‘What the.’

The boy fell backward, just like that? The boy stood up, swearing at the friends around him, he seemed to be really mad. Bada looked around. She’s retaliated, so it was time to look for help from adults now. She looked around quickly. Ah, there was an older man looking at them from a nearby convenience store. Perfect. Just as she was about to shout for help, though, the man turned around with a shake of his head. Was he thinking that they were friends?

‘Oh no.’

She could see the boy step closer. He had his fist balled up tightly, too. Would getting hit by that hurt? She started feeling sorry for her friends. She should’ve just tried to be quiet.

“Should we run?”

“L-let’s fight back.”

“Can we win?”

Pft. Bada almost laughed. She was thankful that her friends didn’t run away. They were even thinking of fighting! What brave girls.

“Hit us, I dare you! We’re not gonna stand still!” Bada shouted.

She raised her voice for a reason, the people around them started directing their attention towards them. The boys seemed a bit surprised, too. Bada remembered that advice her brother gave her a long time ago.

- The loud one always wins. If things go badly for you, just shout. I promise it’ll be helpful. Just don’t freeze up, that should be enough.

She didn’t know what he meant back then, but she did now. The eyes directed here were all on their side, she could see the group of boys start to hesitate a little. Just as she started to calm down, the boy from the start charged at her. Oops. She didn’t realize how angry this boy was. The boy’s hand got raised up, and Bada closed her eyes tightly.

Pow!

The boy flew back with a loud noise, he actually flew backward. Bada opened her eyes in surprise. In front of her was a boy she saw from the waffle shop, the scary-looking boy opened his mouth angrily.

“Well met. I was getting pretty pissed right about now, too.”

The scary boy turned to Bada for a second.

“They’re the bad guys, right?”

Bada nodded dumbly.

"I see. You can leave now."

He didn't seem to be helping her in particular. Really, he just seemed to have business with the group of boys here.

"Ah, what the actual fuck is wrong with today?!"

"Changhu, it's so nice to see you outside of school."

"Dwook, you son of a bitch."

"Shut it. You better prepare yourself. There's no teacher to hide behind here."

The boy called Dwook ran forward after finishing. Bada exclaimed a little in surprise. Dwook managed to send Changhu flying again with a kick.

"W-what the."

"Is he helping us?"

Her friends came over to ask if she was okay. Bada nodded.

'In any case...'

It was a four on one, but the other three boys were just watching right now. Changhu was looking at Dwook nervously, too. Bada took a look at Dwook's back. The boy looked pretty thin all over, but he did have massive thighs.

People started gathering to see what was going on. Some adults were beginning to intervene as well. And...

"Eh?"

"Oh! Brother."

Bada's brother was one of these people, the four boys ran away as soon as the adults started gathering. Bada snorted at them before turning to look at her brother.

"What happened? What's up with your hair?" Her brother asked.

Ah, her hair probably got messed up when she got caught earlier. She started fixing up her hair again. In the meantime, her brother turned to talk to Dwook.

"Dwook."

"What?"

"Wait, you two know each other?"

Bada looked at the two boys in front of her in confusion.

* * *

"See you tomorrow. Be careful."

“Yes, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Maru said his farewells to Junmin and Ganghwan before stepping into the convenience store where Dowook was.

“Thanks for before.”

He already heard what happened from Bada. Maru told her it’d be best to head home, so the girls already left Myungdong at this point.

“I was just annoyed, and they happened to be a good target. I wasn’t trying to help.”

“Well, you helped regardless. Did you eat, by the way?”

“No.”

“You should eat, then. There’s a kimbap place right there.”

“I’d rather have cup noodles. Are you paying?”

“I could, sure.”

“It’s fine. I don’t want to get anything out of you. It feels weird.”

“Weird my ass.”

Maru stepped out and came back with cup noodles and a few rolls of kimbap.

“So, what are you doing at Myungdong, anyway?”

“.....”

Dowook didn’t respond and just silently ate the food in front of him. There must be something going on. For now, Maru opened a can of soda and started drinking from it. After finishing the cup noodles, he stared at the empty cup for a second before opening his mouth.

“Before I say anything else... Thanks for the thing with my dad. I can finally breathe easily at home now.”

“Good to hear. He’s a cool guy, so I hope you get along better with him.”

Dowook smiled. “Hah... Don’t you ever get worried about anything? I don’t get how you’re always so calm.”

“Something happened, huh?”

Dowook wasn’t the type to talk like this. He was a proud kid, so the fact that he was opening up this easily meant something really bad happened. Dowook fell silent again. After a minute of silence, he started off with an “if” on his mouth.

“If... If your sister, who was silent for a whole decade, the one person you didn’t expect to see for the rest of your life... If she appeared out of nowhere, what the hell am I supposed to say to her?”

“Sister?”

Maru started paying closer attention to Dowook’s words.

* * *

“I’ll be leaving. I’m sorry, dad.”

“Soojin.”

Soojin left the cafe biting her lips. She just sat there quietly for an hour, she still couldn’t forget the way Dowook was looking at her.

‘He still feels hurt.’

She shouldn’t have come, it would honestly be better for her to keep living in regret as she did now. Her brother grew a lot after ten years, she could barely recognize him. But as soon as she looked into those fierce eyes of his, she realized that he was her brother after all.

‘I’m sorry.’

Soojin started her car as soon as she got on. Today, too, she was running away. The names of countless kindergartens appeared on her head. She should volunteer during the weekdays as well so that she wouldn’t have to think.

Soojin’s red car slid down the road, making a rather depressing hum as it drove.

Chapter 100

“Leave.”

Dowook waved Maru away in the middle of walking together, Maru watched the boy walk to the bus station for a while before turning away. In a single day, a lot has happened. First off, he got a new assignment, amateur acting classes. He would attend the first meeting on Monday evening, at 8pm. Junmin really knew how to act once a decision was made. Maru got on the bus back home. As he watched the scenery pass through the window, the phone in his pocket vibrated.

[I’ll pay you back soon, so just wait.]

It was her. The message didn’t have much to it, but Maru smiled regardless. He immediately started typing out a reply.

[Try to pay me back on a weekend, if you can.]

The reply came a few minutes later.

[Why?]

[That way we can go on a date.]

Maru quickly stuck his phone back to his pocket. His phone started vibrating with new messages. Without even looking at it, Maru knew she was probably saying something along the lines of, ‘are you crazy?’ She’s really never changed at all. Once he got off the bus and came back home, his sister greeted him. Maru scanned his sister one more time.

“You really didn’t get hit?”

"I didn't. I actually hit back, instead!"

Bada grinned, pointing at her wide forehead. Thank goodness she didn't get hurt. She might be a tomboy, but she was still a girl.

"But besides that, was that boy your friend?"

"Dowook?"

"Mm, yeah."

"Same class. The boy you hit is also in the same class, too."

"What? Really? That asshole?"

Bada seemed to be thinking of what happened this morning, she frowned and huffed.

"Is that asshole your friend too?"

"No way."

"He was soo bad. He's a delinquent, right?"

"He's childish. I didn't think he would be that bad, though."

"I was so surprised. He just pulled my arm out of nowhere."

Bada started explaining what happened, just hearing what happened was starting to irk him more and more. At school, Changhu would never use his fists. He was a smart kid in school, after all.

'No, maybe that's not the case.'

There is trash out there that will resort to violence whenever women get involved. There were a lot of them, actually. Was Changhu also one of those budding abusers? Maru didn't like to get involved as long as he wasn't affected, but since he was involved this time around...

"Brother?"

Maru quickly wiped his frown away when he heard his sister's voice, Bada was looking at him worriedly.

"What? You're making me feel awkward."

"No, you were..."

Bada stopped herself there and shook her head. Maru knew well that he didn't have a particularly friendly-looking face. His resting face actually looked pretty scary, even. If you added a frown on top of that... It probably didn't look good at all.

"Oh, right!"

Bada ran into her room, trying to change the atmosphere. She hesitated a little bit before handing Maru a box. It was something Maru saw earlier in the day. He knew there would be shoes inside, but he feigned ignorance.

"What's this?"

“Present.”

“You should’ve spent that money on your clothes.”

“Don’t worry. I’m never buying you a gift again. I don’t know if it’d fit though. You were 270, right?”

Mm, it was actually 275. Maru didn’t say the truth though, and agreed with her for now. He tried taking the shoes out and put them on. The white sneakers were a bit tight, but he could still wear them.

“Thanks.”

“My friend recommended that one. It’s pretty, right?” “It is. I’ll wear it well.”

Maru put the shoes in the shoe closet and stepped back in his room. It was a busy day, but the day would end just like any of his other days. First, he would read the script for The People of Dalseok-dong. The quality of the line he said for the first time and the line he said for the thousandth time was very different. Keeping that in mind, Maru spoke his lines. Recently, he started trying to introduce different personality traits to his character. In the beginning, Maru portrayed the teenager as someone very cheery and playful. The script described the teenager like this as well.

“How about a cynical teenager, though?”

The teenager was the gateway between the audience and the stage. He would need to talk with Miso before changing the character, but he thought about it anyway. Ganghwan did tell him that analyzing such characters would be very useful. After reading the script for about an hour, Maru went to take a shower. He organized his thoughts in the shower and came back to his room to write a blog post. Recently, he started getting a bit nervous whenever he went to his blog. He was hoping to see a comment from her. To think he could be so happy over such a small thing... They’d have a very fun time if they started dating.

Even though she was adamant that they would stay friends for now.

“I guess I’ll really turn into a dad in the future.”

Same with his friends, too. Maru fiddled around with a CAD software for a short bit before taking out his schoolwork. He didn’t forget anything today, either. Looking at the time, it was midnight. He finished off the day by quickly checking some of the news online. He looked at his table for a moment before taking a long piece of plastic from his jacket. He got this from Junmin before they split up.

“Hope we can stay ‘friends’, Changhu.”

Maru put the piece of plastic back in his bag. He hoped that he wouldn’t have to use this in the near future.

* * *

“Hah.”

Changhu ran up to Maru as soon as he entered the classroom. Maru dodged the boy and quickly took his seat.

“Han Maru, you son...”

“Teacher’s coming.”

Changhu stepped back as soon as the teacher entered.

“Sit the hell down.”

Maru felt like the left side of his face was going to melt away or something during homeroom, Changhu glared at him nonstop.

“What’s that bastard doing?” Dojin asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s puberty.”

Changhu was gritting his teeth, looking at Dojin and Maru repeatedly. The guy was probably looking for a fight the minute homeroom ended.

“Don’t get in trouble, and if you get caught with a cigarette, you better get ready to experience death. Got it?”

“Yes.”

The teacher headed out after lightly banging on the podium. As soon as the man left the room, Changhu stood up. Dowook did the same. Changhu’s friends started standing up as well, almost like domino pieces.

‘Oh dear.’

What kind of a teenage drama was this? Maru shook his head. At times like this, he just had to set up an arena for them. Kids often became nervous if you started making an event much bigger than they intended it to be. The other students in the class started clearing up the middle of the classroom, realizing something was about to happen. One side looked on with excitement, while the other looked very worried. Maru decided to keep the latter group in his mind for now. They were probably kids who got bullied by Changhu.

“You guys fighting? Hey hey! Clear it up, clear it up! They need space to fight!”

Well, Maru might as well turn this into a big event. If he didn’t, Changhu’s gang really might go wild. For now, he needed to get the rest of the class on his side.

“Ooh, yeah. Let’s clear out the tables a bit.”

“Wait a bit, guys! Ya bro’s gonna make you an arena.”

Some of the kids who weren’t intimidated by Changhu stepped forward first. They moved the chairs away as they told Dowook, ‘don’t go for the face, guy’s a damn snitch’ with a grin. Changhu didn’t have many friends in this class, being a delinquent. Dowook, on the other hand, after turning over a new leaf in the middle of school year, had a lot of friends in the class. An arena was made in the middle of the class pretty quickly, Maru pretended to grab a chair near Dowook as he opened his mouth.

“Don’t actually fight.”

“Wasn’t planning to. There’s nothing good I’d get out of fighting someone like that. I would’ve murdered him outside school, though.”

“Nice.”

At this point, the one who was the most troubled by this was Changhu. Things were starting to look like this was going to turn into a one on one, and the other kids in the class were trying to make sure it would stay that way. In the end, Changhu was the one who gave in first.

“Hah, so immature. Are you guys in elementary school?”

He stepped outside along with his friends.

“That coward.”

“I bet he was counting on his friends.” “What a turd.”

The kids put the desks back with a grin. Nice. Maru decided to end the situation here. He took out a plastic stick from his bag, put it in his pocket, and stood up.

“Where are you going?” Dojin asked.

Maru didn’t answer. He still had 30 minutes left till classes started. Maru stepped out into the hallway and looked around.

‘There they are.’

He could see Changhu’s gang go down the stairs. There was a smaller kid following the group with his head down. Probably an unfortunate victim.

Maru started following them with light footsteps.

* * *

“We can just keep an eye on that Dowook bastard for now. The real problem is fucking Maru. Ugh.”

“Don’t get too angry, Changhu.”

“Me? Angry? Hah! Are you kidding? Angry? No way. I’m just annoyed. I just don’t like how that little brat’s acting. I’m not angry.”

“.....”

Changhu felt a little bit better when his friends shut themselves up. Right, this was supposed to be what a normal response looked like. But Dowook and Maru just continued to get on his nerves.

“Hey.”

“Y-yeah?”

“Yeah my ass. What happened to the thing I asked of you from last time?”

Changhu pushed the brat in front of him to a wall. This was the idiot that one of his friends told him about last time, the rich kid who handed money like it was paper.

“Well...”

“Hey, didn’t I say I need to buy my textbooks? I’m trying to study here. A good cause, you know? So don’t make me speak too much. Let’s keep it short. Do you have the money?”

“...Yeah.”

The kid took out three ten thousand won bills.

“You’re doing good, so have some pride. It’s not like I’m bullying you for cash, so why act so scared?”

“Y-yeah.”

“By the way, you’re not going to do something retarded like tell on the teacher, are you? Just making sure.”

“Yeah...”

“Good, you’re a good friend. Let’s go to a karaoke next time, I’ll introduce you to some hot girls. Sounds good, right?”

Changhu stuffed the money into his pockets. Even in engineering schools, there were kids like these. As long as he took good care of them, he should have a pretty thick wallet throughout the rest of high school.

“Anyway, what do we do with Han Maru? I really think we should do something to the acting club if we want to fuck him over.”

He didn’t like Dojin either, anyway. The best way to screw over both of them was to mess with the club they were in. Especially from seeing how much the two cared about the club.

“Oh?”

Right then, one of his friends pointed to one side.

“Hah.”

It was Maru.

* * *

“Where’s Maru?”

Daemyung asked, coming back from the bathroom.

“Dunno.”

“Did he go to take a shit?”

“Dunno.”

Dojin got up from his seat. This was a little odd, it seemed like Maru followed Changhu outside.

“Daemyung, come with me for a second.”

Dojin started moving, remembering that the delinquents liked to hang behind the schools even during break time.