

Once Again 141

Chapter 141

"So it's begun."

Moonjoong quietly opened the door.

"Um, sir, if you may, could we have a few words..."

One of the reporters followed behind him, Moonjoong turned to glare at the reporter angrily.

"The play is about to start"

"Ah... I apologize."

Moonjoong clicked his tongue in disapproval, he could see Chulmin smile bitterly as well. The door was already open and the kids inside were acting. These kids surely worked very hard to get on stage today. Moonjoong respected the amount of work these kids put into their plays and he didn't want to disturb them. After confirming that the reporter went elsewhere, Moonjoong quietly entered. The corridor lights were already turned off and only the lights indicating where the stairs were were left on. Moonjoong could see little silhouettes of people moving at the stage in front of him, the play seemed to have just begun.

"It's been too long," Moonjoong whispered.

He'd often attended plays held by the government acting theaters, but he hadn't seen a play done by students in a very long time. What did these unpolished gems in front of him have to show? He was starting to get a little excited.

"Are you going to stand?"

Moonjoong nodded at Chulmin's question. The play would likely last for a full hour. Instead of making his way through the crowd of audiences, he would much rather stand calmly at the back.

"You folks should go sit over there." Moonjoong told the young actors that followed him.

"It's alright, sir."

Most of the actors shook their head, but Joohyun whispered 'yes' as she took her seat. Moonjoong couldn't help but appreciate the woman for her confidence.

"It's starting."

The lights turned on, painting the stage with a blue hue. The speakers started emitting sounds of a cold wind blowing. The spotlight turned on, focusing on a young man walking out from the right side.

"In the end, I moved here. I should try to earn money as fast as I can and move to the city. Well, at least the town looks quiet."

The boy said his line with a slight smile before walking to the other side. The sound of a car passing came from the speakers and then the sound of construction workers.

“Nice sound effects.”

“Yeah.”

The lights came back on again. There were a few houses, a store, and a table. The boy from a moment ago walked towards the store.

“Damned granny! I told you that’s not it!”

“Do you want to get on an express train to hell, old man? I told you I’d break all of your fingers if you gambled with old man Kim again, didn’t I?”

“Y-you...! Watch your language, woman!”

A boy dressed up as an old man quickly ran out of the store. Soon, a girl in grandma’s makeup ran out with a broomstick in her hand. Moonjoong was a fan of the abrasive nature of their dialogue, he also noticed the detail in the way the boy walked. The boy intentionally made a turtle neck as he stumbled forward. Clearly a lot of research was put into this.

“Stupid old man.”

The grandma character threw the broom to the side of the stage. She threw it with such force that the broomstick spun out of sight. From behind the curtains, the audience could hear the old man shout, ‘ouch!’ The audience laughed lightly as they saw the old lady humph satisfactorily.

“H-hello.”

The boy awkwardly greeted the grandma. The club seemed to be trying to portray the situation with a bit of surprise from the main character, but it didn’t feel awkward at all. Some actors often overreacted when they showed surprise. That was a mistake. In the end, acting is grounded in reality. It was true that an actor would have to accentuate the drama on stage, but the actor still needs to maintain a balance. Moonjoong narrowed his eye as he looked at the stage, he’d seen the main character somewhere else before.

“Ah, he’s the kid that Junmin took in.”

“Junmin?”

“He showed me the kid a while ago asking if I was interested in raising him.”

“I see. He’s gotten very busy, hasn’t he? I feel like he’s involved in just about everything nowadays.”

The boy was called... Hong Geunseok? The name reminded Moonjoong of someone else. He looked behind him in curiosity with Chulmin.

“He’s my brother,” Geunsoo responded.

Moonjoong nodded. The boy must’ve developed an interest in acting through his older brother. Very nice. Oddly enough, Geunsoo looked a little conflicted when he looked at the stage. Did something happen between him and his brother? Moonjoong was a little curious but decided to leave it for now.

“A comedy, huh.”

“They chose a difficult one. I don’t know who their instructor is, but they must be very bold.”

Making people laugh was much more difficult than making them cry. Take a person crying in a subway, for example. Most people would feel sorry for that person. Sadness was a very easy emotion to share. No other emotion in the world was as infectious as it. Laughter was different. Again, back to the subway example. If someone in front of you was laughing, most would think it to be odd. Some might even find it irritating. In fact, 90% of the time people would wonder why that person is laughing. For crying, it’s very easy to start from that same thought and come to the conclusion of, ‘I should help that person’. The same thing doesn’t happen often for laughter. Because laughter is often a mixture of several different emotions.

“Challenge doesn’t always land you good scores.”

“They’re doing very well, though. They clearly got the basics down.”

Moonjoong nodded. It was very easy to tell from the way that the students acted that they practiced a ton for this play. Their pronunciation, movements, and vocalization, though lacking in some areas, surpassed the standard.

“They were taught well.”

“That I agree with.”

They even wanted to see who the instructor was.

“Ah, Blue Sky, was it?”

Blue Sky. Moonjoong had heard of the theater company a few times as well. It was a place where the younger actors of HyeHwa stations liked to experiment, he’d even visited the place a few times.

“It’s a place where I’m currently staying. The people acting there are all my juniors,” Geunsoo responded.

“You must feel quite proud.”

“Yes. I really am. I hope they win an award.”

“Just like you?”

“Of course.”

Moonjoong smiled and turned his attention back to the stage. A plump little boy walked out this time, wearing slightly worn clothes with a book in his hand. Geunsook greeted the boy. They exchanged small talk for a few seconds before the plump boy’s line really began.

“The world, you know, is rotten! Everyone’s trying to get into the government job market, because it’s dumb easy. How stupid is that? If you ask the kids nowadays what they want to be, it’s no longer stuff like the president or a scientist. It’s a government worker or an office worker. Tsk tsk. People need a vision nowadays, don’t you think?”

“R-right.”

“No matter how hard life is, you need to chase after your dreams! Everyone wants to be a government worker. A government worker! Ugh! No wonder the country is becoming like this. What are you doing, by the way?”

“I’m an office worker.”

“An office worker? I pity you.”

“...What do you do, sir?”

“Me? I’m studying to become a government worker so that I can help society.”

The plump boy looked at the audience seats with pride, the boy had such pride in his eyes that made him comical. The audience laughed a little here and there. No one was laughing particularly loudly, but the general mood of the play seemed pretty set. A difficult feat to achieve, especially for a comedy.

“They’re doing well.”

“That they are.”

Geunseok played a very average office worker, the very definition of average, as a matter of fact. On the other hand, all of the side characters in this play were very, very odd characters. In a normal play, a character like Geunseok shouldn’t exist. After all, a play is just fantasy in the end. It would be boring to put someone so average in a play. But the comedic basis of this play came from the interactions between eccentric characters and the reasonable main character. That is, instead of making the story the main point of the play, the characters took the center stage.

Plays like this depended highly on the actor’s talent. Either the play could ingrain all of its characters into the audience’s head, or remain completely memorable.

“The instructor understands the kids very well.”

“It’s not a risky bet, it was a challenge. Or a winning lotto ticket.”

Geunsoo quietly butted into their conversation.

“I might look like I’m bragging, but the instructor’s my friend.”

Chulmin lightly thumped Geunsoo’s head with his fist. What an amusing guy. Moonjoong’s been surprised and amused many times by Geunsoo’s acting. The man had a ton of passion for acting.

“I kind of want the plump one,” Chulmin commented.

Moonjoong nodded. The plump kid was very good at displaying his character’s personality. He was doing it by showing, instead of just telling. The best part was that shaky legs of the boy right now. If you looked closely, you’d notice that the boy’s left was moving with a certain rhythm to it, meaning that the boy was already calculating all of his leg movements in his head. The fact that his small mistakes were starting to look like a part of his character’s personality was a testament to the fact that the kid was trying very hard.

“Damn, this world is disgusting.”

When the plump boy exited the stage with a small frown, Geunseok followed the boy out with a big sigh.

“Um, that bread over there. That’s mine!” Geunseok said on the way out.

The stage became dark again. It looked like the scene was about to change, but that wasn’t the case. As the stage regained its blue hue, a kid stuck his head out from the side curtain on the left.

“It’s really loud, isn’t it?”

The character talked to the audience as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. The spotlight weakly focused on the actor, making the entire stage feel a little dream-like.

“The lighting’s very good, too.”

“They made good use of what little they have.”

Moonjoong didn’t want to analyze the play, but he really couldn’t help it. Chulmin smiled, realizing exactly what Moonjoong was thinking.

“We can’t watch plays normally anymore. We’re too old.”

“I’m not old.”

Moonjoong let out a small laugh before focusing on the play again. He couldn’t help but take note of the staging more so than the actors. The instructor was Geunsoo’s friend, was it? That meant the person was likely to be in the industry. It looked like the high school really went all out this time to hire a good instructor.

“In any case, this play really does have everything.”

“Breaking the third wall... It looks like whoever wrote the script did so in the reference of a standup comedy. Do all high schools nowadays like to try new things like them?”

“No, it’s just this one.”

“I like it.”

“Agreed.”

The actor on stage was standing precariously at the edge of the stage. He was even lifting his heels up, frightening some of the audience members at the front.

“You can see me?”

The actor, who looked like he was about to jump into the seats, took a small turn to return to the center.

“...This is a surprise.”

Moonjoong crossed his arms. Occasionally when you run a theater company, you get to meet odd actors. Ones that don’t seem special, but still manages to entice the crowd. It’s not like they’re handsome, good at acting, or good at displaying emotions, but they still get the attention of the

audience more so than the main characters. Those who are called scene stealers in movies. Of course, that didn't mean the said actors were bad at acting. It just meant that the actors were more average compared to the others, the odd thing was that you couldn't help but focus on that actor in spite of it all.

"He has energy," Moonjoong muttered before looking at Chulmin.

Chulmin was silently focusing at the boy on stage. Moonjoong silently took a peek at the audience. Every single one of them was following the movements of the little actor on stage.

"Dalseok-dong is a very noisy place. There's an odd student living here, there's a very loud grandma and grandpa here. Ah, there's also a lady who likes to overprice everything she sells. She'll come out a little later. How do I know that? I read the script. It's all there."

The boy moved left and right with each line, almost as if he was talking to a friend. He managed to break the wall between the audience and the stage perfectly and was communicating with the audience. It almost felt like he was whispering words to all of them right next to their ears.

"He's very well-practiced. Good."

Chulmin was smiling. This friend always became happy when he found the star that shone in a play. The boy clearly knew how to grab attention even with a quiet voice. He knew how to talk to a crowd and he was very used to it. He directed attention using the gestures of his hands and he naturally gestured at his face as he stared directly at the crowd.

He was bringing the audience close to him. Quietly.

Moonjoong could tell that the boy was boiling over with energy inside, yet he was doing his utmost to try to control it. Left alone, the boy would be able to run around the stage, gripping the attention of the audience, but doing that would break the nature of his character. The boy knew exactly what he needed to do to make use of the dreamlike scene given to him.

When you walk along Hyeonwa station, you end up seeing many young actors acting on the street. Among them, there are many artists who can easily become pros, especially the singers. Many of them are frighteningly good at what they do, but you never end up watching them for long. That's the difficulty artists face with audiences. Skills? Of course, the skills were important, but it's not everything.

You can occasionally see it. A singer who occasionally breaks up and stumbles on a chord, he doesn't even use an amp to help him along. Despite that, he gathers a massive crowd around him. He fills up his mistakes with the guitar with his audiences singing along with him and hides his breaking voice with the cheers from the audience. The quiet noise of the guitar only draws the audience closer to him.

An artist that the audience loves. The children who are loved by the muses. Those who grip the attention of the audience purely through the energy that they emanate.

"Oh, the villagers are coming now."

The boy turned to the left after saying that. He turned so quickly that the baseball cap fell from his head. It must've been intentional, given how the boy quickly looked at the audience with a "sh" gesture and ran away.

Moonjoong couldn't hide his smile as he watched the boy's expression.

Chapter 142

Maru exhaled behind the curtain. His breath felt sticky, almost as if there was still something stuck in his lungs.

'Phew, this is hard.'

He felt stuffy. Maru thought back to the advice he heard all along. Don't get overexcited. He got on stage thinking that and didn't forget that advice even as he got off. Maybe it was because of that, but every one of his actions felt tiring. It felt like his arms and legs were chained up with steel bindings. He barely managed to stop himself from trying to get closer with the audience. Maru breathed slowly, trying to calm himself.

"Good job."

"How was I? Did I make any mistakes?"

"Not at all. You were amazing."

Iseul gave him a thumbs up. Maru stood up straight as he looked back at the stage. Yoonjung and Joonghyuk were making their way out, their characters were a married couple. Joonghyuk was the weak husband and Yoonjung was his powerful, dominant wife. The rest of the play was coming along smoothly.

"I'm next. Hah..."

Dojin shook his shoulder lightly. His character was one that teased everyone else with a smile on his face.

"Just do as you normally do."

"That's what I'm hoping."

Dojin licked his lips nervously. He looked too nervous... Maru stood right in front of the boy, who looked back at him dumbly.

"Why are you so nervous?"

"...I feel like I'm gonna make a mistake."

Dojin opened his script. Just where did that laid-back self of his disappear to? He was even starting to make Iseul, Taejoon, and Yurim start freezing up themselves.

"Oh, yeah. You moved in? That rice ca... ah, crap. Why am I being like this?"

He must've bitten his tongue or something. He moved onto his next line quickly, as the stage got ready to switch to the next scene. Dojin would have to step out once the two seniors on stage get back. If Dojin was sent out like this right now, he'd most likely just stare dumbly at the audience. That was no good. What could Maru do?

He couldn't just erase the boy's nervousness. If he could do that, he'd practically be god. He just had to distract Dojin into focusing on something else.

"Hey."

"Yeah?"

"Clench your teeth a bit."

Dojin followed suit like a little kid. After confirming it, Maru slapped both of Dojin's cheeks lightly. It wasn't painful, despite the loud noise it made.

"....."

"Just say your lines. Don't try to overreact or do anything dumb."

"...Yeah."

"Want me to do it one more time?"

"No, I'm fine. I got it."

Dojin walked forward, massaging his cheeks a bit. Yurim, Taejoon, and Iseul looked their way curiously from the back.

"What, you need one too?" Maru asked.

"Pft. I'm fine. I'm not frozen up like someone over there," Iseul noted.

At that...

"Who's frozen up? I'm just a tiny bit nervous, that's all."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Do well, then."

"I know."

"I'll give you an award if you do well."

"What is it?"

"Want a kiss?"

Iseul grinned playfully, but Dojin managed to answer her surprisingly calmly.

"It's a promise."

He was getting very bold now. On the other hand, Iseul was looking at Dojin dumbly. Dojin's legs stopped trembling; Maru nodded at the boy. Yoonjung and Joonghyuk had just come back.

"Phew, I'm leaving."

“Yeah. Good luck.”

Dojin stepped out with wide footsteps.

“What’s up?” Yoonjung asked.

“I helped him come to his senses.”

“Really? Good job.”

Yoonjung pat Maru’s shoulder as Maru watched Dojin from the side. Dojin would have a thirty-second monologue, he would need to fill up the stage for the 30 seconds that Geunseok was absent for. Dojin coughed and began to talk. His first sentence was a little cracked, but the rest was fine. The lines he must’ve practiced for god knows how long filled up the stage.

Maru could still see a hint of nervousness from Dojin, but it was barely noticeable. The boy’s voice didn’t carry a hint of it, as a matter of fact. Just as he continued watching Dojin on stage, someone grabbed his shoulder.

“Good job, you guys.”

It was Miso. All this time, she was running around behind the stage checking if everything was okay. She looked calm, but Maru could tell that she too, was a little bit nervous. Nervous just like the rest of them.

“You guys are doing perfect. Just keep going exactly like this, you guys are at your best right now.”

Miso wasn’t holding back with her compliments, which inspired the club members to nod energetically. Miso told them the play wouldn’t take much longer before moving elsewhere. Maru followed her.

“Are we fine like this?”

Miso carefully looked over Maru for a second, Maru looked into Miso’s eyes. A word bubble popped over her head.

[Is it alright to tell him this?]

Surprisingly, she was nervous on the inside too. Very unlike her. This was why Maru didn’t actually like this ability. It let him know too much about the people around him and that wasn’t necessarily a good thing. Humans, to him, only looked as natural as they did when they were composed of 80% truth and 20% self-preservation.

“If you’re asking if there’s a problem, then no. You’re fine.”

“You know that’s not what I’m asking. I’m asking if my acting is satisfactory to you.”

Maru was still unable to judge himself fairly. Then again, self-evaluation was probably amongst the hardest things a person could do in the world. That’s why Maru needed someone else’s feedback, he was curious. What did his restrained self look like to the audience? Would it be fine to keep going like this? He needed an answer.

“You’re kind of like a kid when it comes to this.”

“Asking about things you don’t know is a privilege of the children, isn’t it?”

“What do you think? Are you satisfied?”

“I... don't know.”

“I'll change the question, then. Are you having fun?”

He didn't even need to think about that question. He nodded. Miso grinned at him brightly in response.

“That's all there is to it. Don't try to chase after perfection, you're just an amateur.”

“But then the results...”

“Maru.”

“Yes?”

“Don't try to go so fast, you're doing well enough as is. I know you're frustrated, but your character isn't anything special. You're not meant to garner attention. That's why we told you to restrain yourself. But! You're already garnering attention as is. The audience might become too attached to you if you go further from here, and that would only manage to hurt the play.”

Miso lightly patted Maru's shoulder.

“Is that a good enough answer?”

“No. But... I understand it to an extent, now.”

“You're too much. Bring out your everything when you're able to control yourself perfectly. Not even amateurs do things when they know they're not ready. That's just an idiot at work.”

With that, Miso walked away elsewhere. An idiot... Maru scratched his eyebrow. He honestly didn't really know right now. Could he keep going on stage like this, feeling really stuffy inside like he was now?

‘Well, she said I'm fine, so whatever.’

If you're sick, go to the doctor. If your car breaks down, go find a mechanic. If you have questions about acting, go ask your instructor. The instructor said he was fine, so what could he do? Especially when that instructor was a pro like Miso.

“Hah!”

Dojin quickly hid himself as soon as he got off the stage, he immediately started huffing like he was out of breath.

“How was I?” he asked.

“I didn't see,” Maru responded with a smile.

“Ugh, you turd!”

“But looking at the audience, I think you did alright?”

“R-really?”

Dojin flicked his head back to look at the audience, his nervous expression straightened immediately. Maru could tell why pretty easily. The man in the front, the one with the particularly scary face, was smiling.

“We can go... right?”

Dojin was asking the question to everyone around him. No one asked him ‘where’ they were going. They all knew what he was talking about.

“Of course.”

“I won’t be able to sleep if we don’t go to the finals.”

Plus, the fate of their auditorium was at stake this time. No matter what happens, they need to go to the finals. They needed something they could use to appeal to the school.

“Maru, it’s your turn.”

“Yeah.”

Maru got ready to go out again. This time, he was doing a baton touch with Daemyung. He could see an angry student walking towards him from the stage. He slowly took off his first step as well.

“Good luck.”

“Of course.”

They exchanged a short greeting as they passed. For some reason, the stage in front of Maru didn’t look so empty, despite no one being there. Probably because of the amount of passion that got spilled onto the stage seconds before. He could still feel energy emanating from the empty stage.

“They’re very stubborn, aren’t they? My goodness, I felt so frustrated looking at them from off the stage.”

Maru would collect the passion that’s left over on the stage, gather it, and pass it onto the people in the next scene. To do that, he needed to abandon his desire to show off. He couldn’t fill up the stage as much as he wanted to just yet. For now, he needed to listen to the instructor. Hopefully he could go wild some day in the future, but today, he needed to be calm.

‘It’s still fun being up here, though.’

The feeling of the wood under him was great. The heat of the light above him was nice. The silence on the stage felt good. The gazes from the audience felt exhilarating. Acting... was exhilarating.

“I wonder what these people are going to do next. I can’t wait. How do you guys feel?”

* * *

Geunseok was good at acting, Suyeon could tell that the moment she saw the boy. The others were alright, too. More than alright actually, she was pleasantly surprised. They were quite harmonious together. Most high school plays were a little lacking by nature, but this school was different. Instructor Miso was definitely quite talented.

To begin with, the woman was asking Suyeon about what she wanted to do with Geunseok. She was sharp. Probably the reason why the club turned out to be so skilled as well, but there was one person Suyeon was more concerned about.

‘Han Maru...’

The boy she first saw when she met Ganghwan. She was unsure what Junmin meant by him being odd, but she understood the man perfectly now. If she saw skill from Geunseok, she saw possibilities from Maru. Right now, Geunseok was objectively better than Maru. On the other hand, Maru had a skill that Geunseok didn’t have. She might simply be mistaken. This was her first time seeing him act, after all.

‘But I have this feeling.’

Feeling. There was no other word that was as iffy as it. Suyeon only reserved this word for those she believed held more value than they let on. She could tell if she was right after some time, but for now, she was sure that Maru was different. Suyeon tapped at her lip lightly with her index finger. She was thinking. Calculating. How long would it take for her to establish a relationship with Maru? What could she gain from it?

The abacus in her mind quickly came to a conclusion: It would be profitable.

Suyeon felt a need to agitate Geunseok even more. If she used the boy well, she could establish a relationship with both Geunsoo and Maru.

‘Speaking of which, how could he just completely ignore me like that?’

She was ignoring Geunsoo because she didn’t want to greet him first, but Geunsoo didn’t even seem to notice her. It was a little humiliating, but for now, she put Geunseok higher on her list. She would have a lot of fun breaking him down.

‘I’m getting a lot out of this.’

It was a good day.

Chapter 143

The stage was a lot of fun for sure, Maru felt a lot better just saying his lines. Whenever a new reaction from the audience hit him, it felt like more and more of his senses were being liberated.

“It looks like I’ll have to go back inside.”

He gave a slight bow before coming back off stage, he nodded at the club members before grabbing a water bottle on the floor. He was wearing very light clothes, but he was still very sweaty inside.

“Not much left.”

Miso told them to focus until the end, the plashy was quickly reaching its climax. Since the characters never really went through a big conflict, the climax wasn’t particularly tense. It was just a traditional comedy. The play would be considered a success if the audience was smiling until the end. Maru could hear Geunseok speaking on stage. Despite playing a character with no real traits, Geunseok could still

attract attention to him. The boy's voice was trying its utmost in order to not get buried by the other kids around him.

The quality of the play was going up, purely thanks to Geunseok's work.

* * *

"They're good."

"Yeah."

"Didn't Woosung High fail the prelims last summer?"

"Yeah, that's what I heard."

She was whispering quietly with Yoojin while looking at the boy in front of her. The boy on stage was tall and had very well-defined features. The boy's charming voice and energy were almost incredible. That wasn't all. His acting was so natural that the character he was playing almost felt real.

"I wonder why they failed?"

"My senior watched the play, and... Apparently they made a mistake?"

"Mistake?"

"Yeah, apparently it was from the tall kid, so... Probably him?"

"Maru's tall too, though."

"Maru didn't participate in the summer competition."

"Really? So he only started practicing in Fall?"

"Pretty much."

"That's surprising. Really surprising."

Yoojin rested her chin on her hand. It really was surprising. Looking back, Maru told her that he worked a part-time job over the summer. Meaning, he didn't practice at all. He only started practicing in the Fall, so... four months. In any case, the people on the stage left and the stage turned blue again.

"Maru's coming," Yoojin noted.

Maru stumbled out from behind the curtain. He carefully walked to the center before looking around, as if he was about to tell them a secret. His movements were well-rehearsed and flowed well.

"The tall kid is better at acting for sure, but my attention is drawn more to Maru. Is it the lights?"

"Don't know."

She was curious about that as well. She came to see Maru as a fan of plays, not as his lover. Maru was standing in front of her, speaking calmly and easily on stage. His character was unique for sure. It only made sense that he would attract attention, but was that really all there was to it? His character was

unique, but not to *that* extent. There were plenty of other characters in the play who looked nice as well. It wasn't like Maru was significantly better at acting than everyone else, either.

So what made him so much more charming? She thought it was simply because she liked him, but Yoojin felt the same way as her. There had to be a different reason.

'Tone? Expression? Or synergy with his character?'

What was it? She felt herself getting nervous by the second, she didn't want to lose to Maru in terms of acting. She was Maru's girlfriend, but she also didn't want to lose. Especially not as an actor from Myunghwa High.

"I can't read the judges' minds, but they're going to do pretty well, I'm sure of it."

Yoojin sounded confident and she had to agree. She'd followed her dad to watch many plays in the past and she had felt what she was feeling now whenever she looked at good actors. She put a hand over her chest, she could feel it beating.

'He's good. I'm not going to lose, though.'

It suddenly occurred to her that she'd never thought this while she practiced with Maru.

"Yoojin, what was it like practicing with Maru? Was he like this?"

"Mm... Not at all. He's completely different. Maru's very boring when he practices. Not in a bad way. He's really good and well-balanced. Very good to practice with. But it feels like he's always missing something."

"What about now?"

"You can see for yourself, he's very different. Maru on the stage looks... kind of dangerous. It feels like he's walking on a tightrope. You get dragged into focusing on him, because it almost feels like he's going to make a mistake. More than anything, you can see him having a huge amount of fun. You smile before you even realize it."

That was it. She nodded in agreement. Maru had life on the stage, unlike during practice. It almost felt like he was going to charge into the audience right now. Looking at that just made her start focusing on him. His acting was exciting, to say the least.

"Woosung High. I'll have to tell my seniors about it."

"Me too."

She balled up her hands into a fist. What would Maru look like when they got on the stage together? She looked forward to it. She wanted to see the actor that was Maru as soon as she could.

'What the, he's pretty cool.'

She turned to look at Yoojin for a second.

"What is it?"

"No, it's nothing."

“Maru’s cool, right?”

Yoojin smiled oddly. That surprised her. She almost denied Yoojin adamantly. No, she almost told Yoojin to stop looking at Maru so positively. She felt her cheeks redden, so she quickly turned away. She was still looking at the stage, though. She didn’t want to miss it.

“You’re really adorable, did you know that?”

Yoojin pinched her cheeks with a grin. She put on a small frown on her face. Right then.

“By the way.”

“Mm?”

“I’m not the type that gives up even after seeing a goalkeeper.”

Yoojin looked back at the stage after saying that. She widened her eyes in surprise. The girl said something pretty cryptic. She could only tell herself that Yoojin was talking about something else, but she was staring very intensely at the stage right now.

“He’s mine.”

She realized what she said only after it got out of her mouth. Yoojin put a hand over her mouth with a grin. That’s when she realized, she’d just been played.

“You...”

“Shh. The play’s still going on.”

“...I’ll see you after the play ends.”

“Any time. I wasn’t lying about that last part though.”

The girl looked confident, she didn’t look away. They glared at each other for a second before looking away.

“Come on, what about loaning him out?”

“No.”

“So you guys ARE going out then, aren’t you?”

“That’s...”

“You need to get lessons on dating. You’re totally a newbie in that area, aren’t you? I couldn’t help but tease you.”

Yoojin grabbed her face before snapping it back towards the stage.

“Your boyfriend’s about to leave the stage.”

She wanted to say something, but she lost the motivation after seeing that grin on Yoojin’s face. She should just focus on watching the play.

* * *

"Looks like we got a winner here."

"Right?"

"Wow. A comedy. And it doesn't suck, either. It's been a while since I've seen that."

The judges nodded in unison. The prelims would continue until the next week, but they would be hard-pressed to find any teams better than Woosung High.

"So it's Myunghwa High and Woosung High, then?"

"Myunghwa High didn't even go yet, though."

"The kids from that school are very good, remember? I went there last time since I had business at the school, and wow... Their practice room is better than most theaters in Hye-hwa station, they even have their own dressing room. The school's going all out with them."

"Makes sense. They're famous for their acting club, after all."

"The prelims should be nothing for them."

Everyone nodded yet again.

"But disregarding that for a second, Woosung High really prepared a lot for this."

"Yeah. I heard one of their graduates is their instructor?"

"Miss Yang Miso."

"Ahh, I know her. She's very popular at such a young age. She used to be a powerhouse in the Blue Sky theater. So she decided to become an instructor, huh?"

"She probably had a change of mind. It does feel nice seeing a school that used to be famous start to climb back up like this."

"Haha, don't try to score them too well though because of it."

The judges finished their conversation with a smile. At the same time, the play ended. The young club members started to come out one by one for a curtain call.

"That one was really good," one of the judges said, pointing at a tall boy in the group.

Everyone else nodded in agreement.

"And him... we'll have to watch him, but he does have great potential. It'll be fun to watch him."

The odd character that started talking to the audience out of nowhere. It was a character that could've gotten completely ruined, but the boy handled it very well. The judges were able to have a nice time watching the play thanks to it.

"Really? I don't know. It just felt like I was watching a kid who was unable to control himself."

"It does kind of feel like that too. He's like a diamond in the rough? He's good to watch, though, since the tall boy supports the rest of the play so well."

"That's true."

By then, the club members finished their curtain call. The judges put down their pens and clapped with the rest of the audience.

* * *

"Good job."

Miso comforted the club members who returned to the dressing room. She was very satisfied. The club did very well. The judges probably had nothing bad to say about them.

"Phew, it's over."

"No mistakes. Hah..."

The kids finally started relaxing a bit.

"Good work. The next team will come in soon, though, so let's get ready to leave."

Miso wanted more time to talk, but the situation wasn't so good. They couldn't take up the space for too long, given the nature of the event. In the end, they had to get out carrying props without even being able to erase their makeup.

"We have to use these props again, so careful!"

It only felt like their work was truly over when they carried everything outside.

"We did well, right?"

"Yeah, we were awesome."

Miso called the club members closer.

"We'll have to wait for the results, but I don't think we'll fail at all. We can worry about that when we actually get into the nationals. So let's go straight back to practice!"

The kids all nodded at the word. They probably felt it at the stage themselves, the power of practice.

"They'll announce the results next week. Three days later, we'll go into regionals. Ten days later would be the finals. We don't have a lot of time."

Miso wanted to let them go more than anything else just for today, but she didn't show it. It wasn't over just yet.

"Let's review our work when we go back to school. Think of what you did well and what you did wrong on our way back."

"Yes!"

"I'll say it again, but you guys did tremendously well today. This is only the start though, so stay nervous."

"Yes!!"

“Good, let’s get going. From here on out, it will be a race against time.”

Miso looked back at the city hall, she could feel the kids staring at it with her from behind. Finally, they managed to move forward by one step.

Chapter 144

It was for one hour. They practiced for four months, just for that one hour. Maru didn't have much left in his head. As soon as he got off the stage and moved onto cleaning, the excitement in his head just vanished. The only thing that was left in his head was the fact that they were finally finished with the play.

“Lay that over sideways. It might fall over if we’re not careful with it.”

Maru nodded at the moving employee’s advice. He laid the prop down flat and the employees stacked more props onto it. Maru took off his hat and threw it in a corner somewhere.

“I don’t feel quite satisfied.”

Looking back on his performance, Dojin felt he could’ve done better. Maru stretched as he listened to the boy mutter to himself. Personally, he felt like they showed the audience everything, at least with the amount of practice they had. Dojin probably felt a little lacking because he wanted to show the audience more than they were already capable of.

“We did well, still.”

“...Yeah.”

Dojin got back to working with a shrug. Looking at the boy, Maru realized that the club had a lot more props than he first thought. Where did Miso even get some of these?

“Get moving, you lazy asses. You’re only first years, you don’t have the right to be lazy.”

Before he knew it, Miso came up behind him to push him. Her sudden push almost made Maru trip over.

“Do I get compensated for injuries sustained at work?”

“Work injury my ass.”

Miso handed him a drink, it was a can of cold plum juice. It seemed that she took a few minutes to go buy drinks at a nearby convenience store. It was winter currently, but Maru was more than happy to have a cold drink in his hands.

“How was it?”

“What?”

“How does it feel to properly finish your first play?”

“It’s not exactly my first play, so I don’t know.”

“It’s definitely your first play. At least, one that uses this.”

Miso tapped at Maru’s head, making him smile lightly.

“You make it sound like I’m someone who doesn’t even think.”

“You aren’t?”

Miso passed by him after telling him to move his luggage. As Maru loaded a box of makeup onto a truck in front of him, Miso spoke out to him once again.

“Taking up acting was a good choice, wasn’t it?”

She was speaking with her back to him, Maru nodded at her in silence. Strangely, she put a thumbs up over her head, as if she saw his gesture.

“You got everything up?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, let’s get out of here.”

Maru helped the employee put a cover over the truck’s trunk before it took off, Maru watched it carefully until it disappeared from his sight. He didn’t want the cover coming loose as the truck moved.

“Is it gone?” Daemyung asked, coming up from behind Maru.

The boy was looking at the empty parking lot with a desperate expression. Upon closer inspection, Maru realized that Daemyung was holding a chair in each hand.

“Yeap. We forgot a few things?”

“Yeah. I found it as I took out the trash.”

“Man, we’d be so screwed if this was a gas mask.”

“Gas mask?”

“You don’t want to know about it. We’ll have to take this back one way or the other, though. Let’s put it in the instructor’s car.”

The two of them walked over to where the club members were with the chairs. They were all catching their breaths as they sipped their drinks.

“What’s that?”

“A mail we forgot to send.”

“What?”

Maru passed Miso to open the back door of her car. There were clothes strewn all over. There were dresses, even. Probably for other plays.

“Can I move this to the side?”

Miso told them to ‘be careful’, seemingly having realized what they were doing. Just as Maru was about to stuff the chairs in, he found a little white envelope named ‘script’ in front of him. The title of the play was “Statute of Limitations”.

“Must be her next play.”

She was an actor by trade, so it only made sense for her to have a script. Maru carefully cleaned up the clothes some more before putting the chairs inside.

“Check one more time to make sure if you forgot anything. Check your costumes as well.”

They all sent her an ok sign.

“Alright, we should get going.”

Miso would go back by car and the rest of them would take the bus. They should be fine since their costumes didn't look too odd. But...

“Can we remove our makeup?” asked Yurim and Taejoon.

The two of them played older people, so there were a lot of wrinkles drawn on their faces.

“I'll be leaving first to take care of the props,” said Miso, as she took off in the car.

“We'll get going after we wash up ourselves.”

“Sure.”

There was no need for them to move as a group, so the club decided to take off without the two. Thinking about going back made Maru finally realize that the prelims were over.

“Hey, Han Maru.”

As Maru walked towards the bus station next to the city hall, he heard someone call out from behind him. A person he didn't expect to see at all was standing there.

“What are you doing here?”

“Coincidence.”

It was Yoojin, she was grinning as if something good happened. The girl looked very stiff and cold most of the time, but she had a very bright smile. It looked good on her. Maru could feel the club members in front of him stop to look at what was going on. He motioned them to go on without him, but that prompted them to move to him instead, especially Dojin. The boy seemed way too expensive.

“Yoojin.”

“Mm?”

“How do you feel about him?”

Maru pointed at Dojin behind him, Yoojin pretended to think for a second before shaking her head.

“Maru! Will you be late?”

Yoonjung waved at Maru with a smile, her energy seemed to be emanating all the way over to them.

“Friend?”

“No, senior.”

“That’s surprising. I thought Woosung High would be strict.”

“She’s just like that. She’s always radiating with energy. Kind of gets tiring.”

“Oh, I get that feeling.”

Yoojin seemed to have a similar senior back at her school.

“You should go first. I’ll follow you later.”

“Yeah. Have fun on your date! Don’t be late!”

Yoonjung turned around with a wink, the other kids turned away as well. Daemyung was even dragging away Dojin himself.

“Why isn’t she coming, though?” Yoojin blurted.

“Who?”

Yoojin looked around for a few seconds before pointing somewhere beyond Maru’s shoulder.

“There she is.”

Maru looked back. There was a girl running towards the two of them, passing the club members on her way. It was her. She was wearing the hat he gifted her at Myungdong.

“Must feel nice having your girlfriend here,” poking Maru at his side.

Maru grinned, which made Yoojin frown a little. She must’ve wanted to see his surprised reaction.

“What the, that’s no fun.”

“Don’t tease her so much. She gets mad surprisingly easily.”

“Oh? Got any proof of that?”

“I can tell just by looking at your face.”

“...I have nothing to say to that.”

She gestured at Maru to leave, so he started walking towards her. Maru could see Dojin and Daemyung’s eyes start to widen as she ran over. Ahh, Maru was going to be bombarded with questions later. Dojin was already mouthing words at him.

“What’s up?” Maru asked.

“What, I can’t come over?”

She handed him something with a little pout, it was hand warmer. The kind that generated heat if you shook it.

“Cold, isn’t it?”

“Not very.”

He still took the hand warmer gladly, his hands were starting to warm up.

“Did you watch the play?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s embarrassing.”

It really was embarrassing. He was fine with other people watching him act, but knowing she was watching made him feel embarrassed. Where was she watching him from? Could she look at him well? What did she think?

“You were good.”

She was curt with her opinions, as always. She sounded a little bit nervous, though. What was up with that?

“By the way...”

She opened her mouth before Maru even finished talking.

“Our play is at 11am next Sunday.”

“I know.”

“Come watch. Promise me. I’ll... do well, too.”

She was burning with passion, for some reason. Was it because of him? She grabbed Yoojin’s hand before walking off to the other side.

“You should get going. Your friends are waiting for you.”

“...Yeah.”

Maru pocketed the hand warmer before walking towards his club. After a few steps, he turned to look back. She was walking back to the hall with Yoojin. He didn’t know how to explain it, but he didn’t feel too bad about what just happened. Well, that was enough. He took out his phone as he watched Dojin walk towards him with a massive frown. He quickly sent a message.

* * *

[Thank you for coming to watch.]

It was from Maru.

“What the, that was Maru, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“What did he say?”

“He said thank you.”

She showed Yoojin her phone before putting it back in her bag.

“You should’ve kissed him.”

“What?”

“Be honest with me. How far did you go?”

“You...”

“That’s... Pft, you guys are still just holding hands, aren’t you?”

Yoojin immediately smiled, telling her it was just a joke.

“Why were you being so cold to him, by the way?”

“Me?”

Cold? She didn’t think she was being so cold to him.

“You cut him off after you said what you wanted.”

“Oh, that.”

She turned back to look at Maru. She wanted to congratulate him, but the first thing she thought of when she saw Maru was the stage. He grabbed everyone’s attention. Just thinking that far suddenly made her feel competitive. She liked him, but their relationship and acting were two different things. This was the first time she ever caught herself staring dumbly at a person her age. She felt happy at seeing something new and she also felt a little jealous of Maru. She would’ve felt Maru was just amazing if she didn’t even know him. Indeed, the tall kid back there was amazing. She felt nothing more, nothing less. But since she knew Maru well, she started feeling a bit more competitive. She didn’t really want to win, per se. It was more that...

“It feels like I’m falling behind.”

“Behind? In what?”

“...No, it’s nothing.”

The boy who likes acting, it would be fun to be on stage with someone like him. But if the boy was that much better than her, then... Could she really say she would be standing on stage with him?

“Hey, where are you going?!”

Yoojin shouted at her when she started speedwalking. She responded with a small frown on her face.

“Practice.”

“What?”

“I need to practice.”

“Why, all of the sudden?”

“I want to stand beside him.”

“Beside him?”

Yoojin smiled in understanding after a few seconds.

“Wow, you’re too cute.”

The girl pinched her cheek. She tried to push Yoojin away with a pout, but the girl kept chasing after her.

“You’re head over heels for him, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not!”

“Liar.”

Yoojin started dragging her towards the hall.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Mom. You have time, right?”

“Practice...”

“Experience is practice, too. I’m gonna go on a date with mom, so come with me.”

“What?”

“Don’t feel so pressured. My mom is... kind of like me. Worse, actually. She’ll love you.”

“W-wait.”

She tried to resist, but Yoojin was too insistent. In the end, she was dragged all the way to the hall.

Chapter 145

Moonjoong separated from his group when he got the chance. Chulmin gestured for him to stay, but Moonjoong wasn’t a fan of such meetings. He decided to leave while Chulmin was busy talking with the event organizers. Inside the hall were a lot of students, all holding a packed lunch in their hands. They had an hour of rest. Even as they ate, they were practicing their lines. What passion.

Moonjoong couldn’t be more thankful that these kids existed. Nowadays, there were many other things to watch for entertainment than just plays. Plays were a very niche genre of entertainment at this point. Despite that, these kids were acting. They were enjoying it. As long as kids like this existed, the art of plays would never disappear. In that sense, the industry needed hard-working people like Chulmin and talented people like Geunsoo.

“You’re working hard.”

“Ah, yes.”

The kids looked a little wary of him. The makeup on their faces looked a little awkward, but their eyes were like that of a pro’s.

“Is acting fun?”

Moonjoong wondered for a second if he was coming off as nosy, but the kids answered him surprisingly kindly.

“It’s not always fun, but... It feels good to complete a play we’ve been practicing.”

The kids had such a pure smile on their faces. Moonjoong told them to perform a play they could be satisfied in before taking his leave. Looking at young kids like this reminded him of someone. He put on his glasses and started pressing the buttons on his phone. Soon, a voice came from the other side of the phone.

- Yes, sir.

“Maru?”

- Yes, that’s me.

“I can’t find you nearby.”

- By that, do you mean...

“I’m here at the Anyang hall. Did you leave already?”

- You were there in the building?

“I ended up here one way or the other.”

- We just came back to the school after cleaning up. The waiting room is small, so we had to get out quickly.

“I see.”

So that’s why he couldn’t find Maru anywhere. Moonjoong thought for a brief second before opening his mouth.

“Is your instructor next to you?”

- Yes.

“Ask her if she minds if I visit, would you?”

- You’re coming here?

“In about one or two hours. If you’re there by then. It’s nothing special, just...”

Moonjoong looked behind him as he trailed off at his last sentence. He could still see the students practicing in the hall.

“...I was curious about the person behind that play and I would like to say a few things to you if I have the chance.”

- That would be an honor.

“Haha, it’s nothing.”

- I’ll ask my instructor in that case, sir. I want to hear you speak any time, but the instructor...

“Ahh, of course. I just wanted to visit with the instructor’s permission.”

- If the instructor declines, I would like to visit by myself. I thought I got on your bad side when you didn’t contact me.

What a kid. Moonjoong often found himself wondering if Maru really was just a teenager whenever he talked to the boy.

“I’m quite grateful you think of me so highly.”

People say you get stubborn as you age. At the beginning of his career, Moonjoong was definitely quite stubborn. He was arrogant, too. He used to think that plays couldn’t be successful without him. That those who didn’t cast him were out of their minds. He thought his fame would continue forever. He stopped telling himself to be humble at some point and he started thinking that those who tried to become more successful than him were simply foolish. Around then, he left the industry to take a break. He was in his mid-fifties then and the year-long break taught him many powerful lessons. One of which was that relationships established through fame were as fragile as glass.

That was when he decided to take a step back to teach the children. It wasn’t that he lost his passion, he was just embarrassed. He thought he had everything in his grasp, but it was actually flowing out like sand. He only realized that people mature within their loneliness when he turned sixty. The one relieving thing he’s realized though was that the person that was Yoon Moonjoong wasn’t as big an asshole as he thought himself to be. The worst thing he’d heard about himself from his peers only described his behavior to be ‘expensive’. Hearing that question could only make him laugh.

After he retired from the industry, people started treating him like some grand old thing. Frankly, it was pretty embarrassing to be treated with such respect, but ah well. From then on, the first thing he felt whenever people came to him for something was thankfulness.

- I’ll call you back in a few minutes, sir.

“Take your time. I’ll have to stay here for about two more hours anyway.”

Moonjoong hung up with a smile. He knew how difficult and dangerous it was to raise a person, that’s why he made it explicit to Junmin that he was willing to teach just a single person. Teaching someone meant that you were influencing that person’s life. Like it or not, you were changing the person’s trajectory in life one way or another. Taking such an act lightly would be a sin, that’s why Moonjoong didn’t use the word “teach” a lot. The most he usually did was to give advice to people based on his experiences. As he walked around a bit more outside, he heard someone call out to him. It was Chulmin.

“What’s the main character of the show doing outside?”

“Main character? No way.”

“The director and the writer are here. Talk to them for a bit.”

“Will it take long?”

“No, this is just a simple greeting. We can talk about the specifics some other time. We just need to make sure that you’ll get along.”

“You think an oldie like me would care about who I work with?”

“Is that really something you should say, Mr. Yoon?”

The two of them walked back inside with a grin.

* * *

“Who?” Miso asked again.

“Mr. Yoon Moonjoong.”

“Who is that, a teacher?”

“No, the actor.”

“...Who?”

“The actor, Mr. Yoon Moonjoong.”

“Just a person with the same name, right?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Is it who I’m thinking of right now?”

“Probably.”

“And he’s coming here right now?”

“He wanted to know if you were fine with it first...”

“Fine with it? Of course I am! Of course he’s welcome here!”

The club members all looked at them weirdly from all the noise Miso was making.

“He’s not coming here right now. He said he’s going to take some time.”

“How long?”

“About two hours?”

Two hours. Miso looked around the auditorium. Was there a place for him to sit? No, was this place even good enough for him?

“He also told me to tell you to not make a scene just for him.”

Miso couldn’t calm down despite hearing that. The name Yoon Moonjoong held many meanings to her.

“Do we have any nice chairs here, instead of these wooden ones?”

“Probably in the faculty room.”

“Come with me.”

The two of them walked right down to the first floor. There were quite a few teachers here despite it being a Sunday, they picked a chair that looked pretty comfortable and asked the teacher if they could take it. They looked troubled at first, but their demeanor changed as soon as they heard the name, Yoon Moonjoong.

“Really? Mr. Moonjoong is coming?”

The reaction from one of the older female teachers was quite something. The woman gave them a blanket and even a yokan as a snack. She asked for a signature as well, prompting a nod from Miso.

“Hold this.”

Miso held the blanket and Maru carried the chair. The club members asked them what was happening when the two of them returned to the fifth floor.

“A heavyweight senior might be coming to visit us. Guys, get to practice. Write a list of everything you were unsure about. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. You can’t buy experience like this even with money.”

The kids understandably looked a little confused even after hearing Moonjoong’s name. Miso was more than ready to explain how amazing this actor was, but she decided to let it pass for now.

“Ugh, I’m so nervous.”

“Just be yourself, this isn’t normal for you.”

“You’re the weird ones. This is the teacher Yoon we’re talking about. Ahh, to think I’d experience a generational gap with something like this... It’s just a single decade, too.”

“You’re old.”

“Do you want to die, Maru?”

Maru shrugged.

“How did you get to know teacher Yoon, anyway?”

“I met him through Mr. Junmin. He told me a lot of good things.”

“You should’ve told me about that.”

Maru saluted her like a soldier and said “Yes, sir. Any time.”

“What’s he like anyway?”

“He’s a kind person. He listens seriously in conversation, even to the boring stuff. Well, I’ve only met him once, though.”

“Hah, I’m nervous.”

“I could just tell him to not come.”

“Are you kidding me? He retired from the industry by the time I started acting. I had no chance to ever meet him because of that. I can’t believe I’m going to meet him like this.”

Maru looked very cute today to her, all of a sudden. Miso grabbed the boy's cheeks and shook him sideways.

"Aghh..."

"You damn cutie! You're a little ball of luck."

"It hurts."

"It hurts? I'll do it more!"

Miso grinned like a child, making the club members stare at the two of them in even more confusion.

* * *

"It was an honor to meet you," the director said, stepping back.

"An honor, he says."

"I feel so embarrassed to hear comments like that nowadays."

"Don't lie to me. I know you like it."

Their short meeting ended. The director showed aspiration and the writer showed ambition. When Moonjoong asked the director if he would still be popular on the screen, the director told him that views weren't an absolute metric for success. The young director had quite the spirit.

"I just hope he doesn't get corrupted by money."

"That's what we all hope, but to be completely honest, how many people do you see that aren't tempted by money? People only try new things here when they have nothing to lose."

"Of all the people he could've chosen, he got someone like me..."

"Come on, since when did you have so little confidence? You used to go off about how movies couldn't succeed if you weren't in it."

"Why do you keep bringing up stuff from when I was immature?"

"You call 50 immature?"

Chulmin seemed to be taking a great enjoyment out of teasing him. Men just never grow up.

"Alright, I'll be taking my leave now," Moonjoong said.

"Where?"

"School."

"School?"

Moonjoong nodded.

"Is it for that kid?"

“Damn, you’re good. You should make a living off of being a prophet instead of this.”

Moonjoong stepped out of the building, leaving Chulmin inside. When he called Maru a few minutes ago, the boy handed the phone over to the instructor. The instructor introduced herself as Yang Miso and she told him that she would come to greet him right away. He said he was fine, but she was so insistent that he had to give in. Chulmin stepped out of the building behind him with a curious expression.

“Maybe I should go.”

“I thought you were busy?”

“I’m interested in this.”

“Haha, just take care of the people under you. Also, Geunsoo.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Yang Miso was your friend?”

“Yes.”

Moonjoong nodded. Blue Sky... It turned out to be a nest full of dragons. It felt like kids from that club were all incredibly talented. He was kind of excited, actually. What are these kids like? What does Maru look like in practice?

“Let’s go for a drink some time.”

“Sure.”

Chulmin quickly left the area with Geunsoo. As he thought, the man had a lot of things to do. After a few minutes of waiting, a car sped towards him from afar. A young lady got off the car after stopping in front of him.

“Hello! I’m Yang Miso.”

The woman had quite the voice. Moonjoong got into the car with a smile.

Chapter 146

“Could you... Look in front of you, miss?”

“I’m looking very well.”

“No, not me. The front.”

Moonjoong pointed in front of him with a small smile, the light was turning green. Miso bowed apologetically before stepping on the pedal.

“Do I really look that interesting?”

“Well, it’s just... No, I know this is really rude to say, but yes. Also, please speak casually to me. You’re a senior.”

“But this is our first time meeting.”

“It’s fine, really.”

“...Alright, fine then.”

Moonjoong looked at the books, notes, and scripts strewn about inside the car. He used to put all sorts of stuff in his car at some point as well, for the sake of conserving time. He started sleeping in his car instead when he realized that proper rest was also a part of his work.

“Can I look at these?”

“Of course.”

Miso was a very energetic woman. Most men probably can’t assert themselves in front of her. Moonjoong picked up a script and slowly started reading from it. Scripts were essentially a notebook of an actor’s life experience, it was a valuable source that told him about an actor’s personality. The cover was a little wrinkled and quite dirty, but the script inside looked brand new. She didn’t seem to have taken notes in it. Moonjoong noticed a notebook next to where the script used to be, she seemed to have written her thoughts over there.

“You throw your script against the wall when you can’t memorize your lines?”

“...Hm, hm.”

Miso smiled awkwardly.

“I used to do that a lot myself, especially when I practiced accents. I used to throw my script at something almost daily. It really annoyed me. I could never get the little nuances right, no matter how hard I tried.”

“You have experiences like that as well, sir?”

“I wasn’t always good at acting, after all. Not that I’m good now.”

“Please don’t say that. If you’re not good at acting, then what does that make me?”

“Acting changes and evolves over time, like anything else in the world. Looking at the actors nowadays always astonishes me.”

“No, that’s not it at all.”

Miso looked a little angry. How funny. He was thankful that she thought of him that way.

“Isn’t teaching the kids difficult?”

“Sometimes, yes. The club exists only for a student’s enjoyment, but there are also kids whose enjoyment depends on results. If I can’t bring results to those kids, then... I can’t help but feel a little useless. Ah, not that results are everything, but...”

“Most of the times, it is.”

“Right.”

"It looks like there's something going on."

"...I have a very big worry, at least for myself. It's not a very big problem, but my pride is at stake."

"Could you tell me about it, if you don't mind?"

"Mm, putting it simply, the club I'm working with is about to lose their practice room because we lack the results."

"Oh, dear."

"This is also the club I spent my high school years as well."

"Ah, I heard about that from Geunsoo. You graduated from here?"

"Yes. Eh, you know Geunsoo?"

"Of course, I'm working on a play with him."

This was news to her. Moonjoong smiled lightly.

"Could it be, the Myungdong Art Theater reopening..."

"Oh, so you knew."

"Really? I'm so sorry. I would've gone to see you if I knew."

"No need to be sorry. Don't try to come when you're so busy either. It looks like you're doing a lot of things other than teaching anyhow."

The back seat was littered with all sorts of costumes. That probably meant that she was about to perform in a play. Teaching and acting... Two very hard things to do at once.

"No, not at all. I'll come this, no, next week."

"We're going to hold the play until the end of January, so take your time."

Hearing from others that they would come to see his play always brought joy to him. It also shouldered him with the responsibility of making the play a success, to a degree.

"Um, Teacher."

"Mm?"

"How did it feel to pick up acting again?"

"Hmm."

What did this energetic woman want to hear from him? Moonjoong put on a wide smile when he came up with an answer.

"It's fun but difficult. Sometimes I want to give up, but I also want to keep doing this. You know the drill."

Miso grinned in satisfaction.

* * *

Miso returned with Moonjoong by the time they were about to go into their second practice. The club members all tensed up as they saw an old man enter the auditorium.

"I'm sorry for interrupting you all."

"Interrupting? There's no way, sir."

Miso tried to line up the kids, but Moonjoong stopped her.

"Just keep going with practice as if I am not here."

Maru brought Moonjoong a chair.

"Thank you."

The man sat down next to Miso. The club members still looked a tad confused, at least until Miso opened her mouth.

"Keep practicing."

"Yes."

It was just a single audience member, but according to Miso, this old man was someone extraordinary. The club members all looked a little nervous because of it. Maru, too, could feel himself tense up a little bit. They were acting in front of an old school legend right now. The president thought a little about whether they wanted to start from where they left off, or start from the very beginning. In the end, they decided to start all over again.

* * *

"How are they?"

"Very good. The young ones are good at acting like I first thought."

The man might've just been saying things to be polite, but it was good to hear nonetheless. Miso brought out the tea and the yokan she prepared for him.

"I'll have some after I finish watching them."

A very clear, and yet soft, refusal. Miso didn't ask twice and put the snacks elsewhere. The man was watching the kids very carefully, he wasn't just skimming them over. Because of it, Miso was even more on edge than the kids. What would he say after this? Eventually, the run ended and the kids looked their way.

A short applause came from Moonjoong. Miso felt proud, as if she was the one who was praised.

"This is too good to be a free play."

Moonjoong stood up from his seat.

"Teacher?"

"I don't have much to say. I feel like I just wasted your time. I'm sorry about that."

"No, sir."

Miso stood up as well.

"The kids would only feel uncomfortable if I stay, so I should take my leave."

"Already?"

"They're good kids, so I don't have much to say. Especially when they already have such a good teacher."

"Please don't worry about me."

Miso quickly called over the club members. Moonjoong tried to stop her, but she couldn't allow him to leave like this. She didn't know when she'd even be able to see him next time.

"Please, sir. I'm still very lacking. I have a lot of things I would like to do for these children, but I'm lacking. You're different."

"I'm not someone that amazing either."

"But you're still much better than me. Please don't deny it."

That was how Miso felt. Even now, she referenced a lot of Moonjoong's works when she practiced. Everything from his black and white films, to colored ones. Hearing advice from a living legend like him would surely help the kids greatly.

Moonjoong smiled awkwardly. Did he have other arrangements he needed to attend to?

"Are you busy, by any..."

"No, not that. It's just... haha."

Right then.

"Sir, could you just give us small advice, like something you'd tell your grandson?"

It was Maru, Moonjoong thought for a second before sitting back down. Miso threw the boy a thumbs up. What a good kid.

"I can't give you advice as an actor, since I'm too old for the industry now, but... If it's just simple advice, then I can give you something. Would it be alright for me to take some of your time?"

Moonjoong looked at the club members carefully.

"Thank you," Maru said, taking a seat.

The other kids followed suit, things were a lot less awkward once Maru got involved.

"You probably wouldn't know me very well. I'm just an old man who chased after acting all my life because I happened to like it. Are there any of you that are considering taking up acting seriously?"

Three kids raised their hands at that: Maru, Daemyung, and Geunseok.

“So the rest of you are doing it as a hobby.”

“Yes.”

Moonjoong closed his eyes for a moment. His wrinkled eyes were trembling. Everyone became silent as they watched the man reminiscing about the past.

“Acting... was my life. It was how I made my living, it was how I raised my child, and it was how I prepared for my retirement. There were a lot of tiring moments, but I also had a lot of fun doing it. I wanted to give up at certain points and I was sometimes relieved that I decided to take up acting. That’s why I always want to say two things when I look at kids like yourself. First, to keep on practicing. Second, there are quite a lot of good things that will happen to you in the industry, no matter how bad things may seem.”

Moonjoong tapped his knees a few times.

“If you take up acting as a hobby, there probably won’t be a more fun one for you. You’ll be able to meet a lot of interesting people and become a handful of interesting characters. Your life would be full of excitement and smiles. That’s why I would like to tell you, the hobbyists, to continue on with acting for as long as you can.”

Most of the kids nodded. Miso noted that the three that said they would take up acting as a career weren’t nodding at all.

“For those who want to make a living out of acting... I want to tell you to be afraid of yourself the most. You’ll experience a lot of things as you act. You’ll experience bitter failure, and sweet success. It’ll help you all grow for sure and your skills would improve along with it. But I want to tell you that having good acting skills is not paramount for success.”

Bitter words, but these were words that the three of them needed to hear the most.

“If, by some chance, you end up getting popular, you will need to constantly take time to reflect on yourself. What’s more dangerous than other people’s tongue is your own and your eyes are more dangerous than that of the others. The moment you get swallowed by your own pride, then you’ll instantly turn from a popular actor to a mere pebble in the road. And...”

Moonjoong stood up again. This time, Miso wasn’t able to stop him. The amount of force that came out of him was incredibly intimidating.

“I always tell this to the kids who ask me to teach them. Always endure when you want to give up. Leave when you feel like you’ve done enough. That’s the best way to not get swallowed up by your own pride and money.”

* * *

Moonjoong looked up at the fifth floor as he exited the school.

“Dear.”

He wanted to say a lot of things, but he came out in a hurry. It wasn't that he was busy or that he didn't like the atmosphere. He was just too excited. Watching the kids act in such joy made him want to act as well. He just said what he wanted to tell them before walking straight out.

"I guess I'm an actor no matter what I do."

Moonjoong smiled as he walked out of the school entrance. He couldn't wait to lay his hands on his new script.

Chapter 147

"Did something happen?"

"What?"

"You were a bit scary. I thought you were going to swallow me whole."

Her senior told her to relax a little.

"Was I weird?"

"You were a bit too into it?"

"I see."

"Are you nervous since we're going tomorrow?"

"Not really, just... Hah."

Her senior clapped her hand for everyone's attention.

"Let's rest a bit. We can't overdo practice today. We'll move to the hall after this to practice there as well, so get ready."

"Yes."

She dropped down on the spot. She was more tired than before, for sure.

"Tell me if you have any worries. I'm all ears," the senior told her.

There probably wasn't anyone else in this club who was more fitting to be the president than this senior.

"I feel like I'm just hurrying a bit too much."

"Hurrying?"

"I actually went to watch a play from a different school last week."

"Prelims?"

"Yes."

"By yourself?"

"Yes."

“You should’ve called me.”

She couldn’t bring herself to tell her senior that she went to watch her boyfriend. She glossed over that part and went straight to her thoughts about the play.

“They were from Woosung High and... They have a lot of really good people. Three of them, especially.”

She felt a lot of things when she looked at Maru’s acting. She almost felt like... She discovered something she didn’t expect at all from a friend of hers? A bit of jealousy as well? Worst of all, Maru was starting to look a little bit foreign to her and she hated that. After the prelims, they would get on stage together in the Myungdong Art Theater. Maru would be one of the main characters, she would be an extra. There was also that massive gap between them.

In the past, she was happy just knowing that she was acting with other people. It was different now. When she looked at Maru, it didn’t feel like enough to just stand on the same stage as him. She wanted to be on equal footing with him, like Yoojin.

“So? Did you feel unmotivated? Because someone was better than you?”

“No, but...”

A loud slap resounded. Her back was tingling with pain and her senior was looking at her with a massive frown.

“I don’t know what you saw, but putting on such a face isn’t helpful.”

Her senior put a hand behind her back and rubbed hard. She barely maintained her balance as she looked at the girl next to her.

“It’s simple in the end, isn’t it? We just need to pass them in the competition. That would easily testify our skills against theirs. Isn’t that enough?”

“Yes, but... Hah, I don’t know. I have no idea why I feel like this.”

The girl narrowed her eyes before whispering into her ear.

“You got a boyfriend, didn’t you?”

“...!”

She tried her best not to react. She really did. Her senior was still grinning like a kid in front of her though.

“So he’s at Woosung, huh? Look at you. He’s in your acting class, isn’t he?”

Did she have everything written down on her face or something? She rubbed her cheeks just to make sure she didn’t.

“I’ll keep it a secret, so tell me. Is the good kid your boyfriend?”

“...Yes.”

"No wonder you were looking so depressed out of the blue. Men are always the problem. Ugh. I guess I'm in the same boat as you, though."

"What? You too, senior?"

"He says he's going to do his military service. But my gosh, he didn't even bother telling me about it until two days ago."

"M-military?"

That meant his age was... She quickly gave up on thinking about it. Her senior was in her last year of high school. The girl was plenty mature as well, so she would probably get along well with a college student.

"I don't know what your problem is, but you can still see him close by. Don't let your problem get to you and just ask. Men are idiots when it comes to trying to figure out their girlfriends' issues."

Her senior got up after saying that. Should she try to console the girl a little bit? Knowing that she could meet Maru whenever she wanted... It was an obvious fact. It comforted her more than anything for some reason.

"Maybe I'm being jealous." "Jealous? Of who?" her senior replied.

"Him."

Her senior smiled.

"He must be a good guy. Try not to lose him. Then again, if he has half a brain then he would know not to let you go."

"Senior, please!"

"In any case, don't worry about any of that right now. Just focus on that prelim."

"Alright."

For now, the prelims came first. Hearing that cleared her head a bit. She should thank her senior for that.

"Did you schedule a date with him after this, by the way?"

"What? What date?"

Her senior simply pointed at the calendar on the wall. There was a single date that was circled with a red pen. The day of the prelims. And also... A very special day for a select group of people.

"Merry Christmas."

"....."

"Just don't break the speed limit, alright?"

That was when her head turned completely pink.

* * *

"An actor's performance can shine or wither depending on how they were directed. This is why directing is difficult. You can't just focus on one thing. You have to see the bigger picture."

"Is there a way to study it by myself?"

"There is. Watch a lot of plays. There's plenty of resources nowadays. Keep a notebook specifically meant for it. Take notes on how they set up the beginning, middle, and end of the play. Why did they use that music in that scene? Why did they use colored lights in this scene? Why were the actors placed in such manners? Think carefully about all of this. At some point, you'll be able to discern which director did which play just based on how the play got set up. That is, you'll be able to recognize that particular director's specialty. When you study just about anything, you have to start off from copying. That never changes even here."

Daemyung tried his best to memorize what his coach just told him. Acting was fun, but he really wanted to do more than that. He wanted to produce and direct his own play. To him, that sounded more exciting than just about anything else.

"Getting first hand experience in the industry would be for the best though..."

Coach scratched his chin for a second before making a call somewhere.

"Yes, senior. There's a really nice kid that big bro Junmin brought in, and... Yes, don't you already have a junior who carries around a student nowadays? Yes, yes. Ah, Mintae. I wanted to introduce this kid to him. The kid's interested in stage tech. It seems like a bit of a stretch to try to put him under you, Senior. I thought it'd be nice for him to do a few things with Mintae instead. Yes. I'll see you in Myungdong, then."

Coach gestured at Daemyung after hanging up. Daemyung grabbed his bag and walked outside. The moment they got in the car, the coach revved up the engine.

"By the way... You don't have anything planned on a Saturday like this?"

"Anything?"

"Like a date."

"....."

"Ouch, did I hit you where it hurts? Sorry about that."

"H-haha."

Daemyung just scratched his head awkwardly in response.

"Then again, I didn't have a girlfriend when I was at your age either."

Well, that was a surprise. Coach looked incredibly handsome. Not only that, but he was also a very popular actor as well. Daemyung even remembered being absolutely shocked at the number of gifts the coach received from his fans. Someone like that didn't have a girlfriend in high school?

"Here, let me show you something fun."

The coach took out a picture from his wallet on a red light. It was a group of young boys.

“Find me in this picture.”

The boys in the picture all looked around Daemyung’s age. Considering how his coach was in his late thirties, this picture was probably more than twenty years old. Daemyung chose the boy who looked the most handsome out of all of them.

“You think that’s me?”

“Yes, I think this one resembles you the most.”

“That’s my older brother. I’m the furthest one on the left.”

Daemyung’s eyes slid over to the left of the picture. He could see a fat boy he previously overlooked.

“This is you, coach?”

“How is it? I look like a pig, don’t I? I think I was around 98 kilos back then.”

Daemyung scanned his coach up and down. Someone this fit used to be so fat back then?

“I’m not telling you to lose weight just for the sake of losing weight. I’m not against people being fat. As a matter of fact, I still like the way I looked back then. Some people hate being fat. That wasn’t me at all. It was nice not having to watch what I ate. Sure, not being able to score a to date was a big loss. But I never felt bad about it.”

The coach had a massive smile on his face.

“Anyway, the lesson here is that self-love is very important. You know that it shows on your face a lot, right? I can see you getting noticeably depressed when we started talking about appearances.”

“R-really...”

“One of the first things a person needs to do to look charming is to get self-confidence. Manners and everything else comes after that. Be honest with me. You think you look ugly and fat, don’t you?”

Daemyung nodded.

“You were hurt by that, too?”

“...Yes.”

“What about now? Is anyone making fun of you for your appearance nowadays?”

“No.”

“So why are you still hurt by it? No one’s making fun of you for your body. Just who’s bullying you now?”

Coach gripped Daemyung’s shoulder tightly.

“There’s a saying that a teacher I respect likes: your tongue is more dangerous than the tongues of the others. The type of pain that gnaws away at your heart is often self-inflicted. It’s impossible to live

without caring about how other people view you. So the least you can do is to care more about yourself. I hope you can smile more easily the next time I ask you something about a girlfriend.”

Daemyung nodded slowly. He thought he was over it, but he realized now that he never really shook off his inferiority complex. Hopefully, he can be more confident in the future. No, even before that, he hoped he could smile like his coach just said in the future.

“By the way, coach.”

“Hm?”

“Why did you lose weight?”

There was no reason for his coach to lose weight, was there?

“Why? Isn’t it obvious? What’s my profession?”

“Musical... Ah.”

“I’m always ready to get fat again. If there’s a fat character waiting for my portrayal, I’m more than ready to sit on my ass and start eating.”

It was a confident answer.

* * *

“Where are you going?” Bada asked, coming out moments before Maru left.

“I’m going to Anyang.”

“Anyang? For what?”

“Girlfriend.”

“.....”

Maru waved at his dumbstruck sister before walking out. Right before the door closed, he heard his sister shout ‘mom!!’ from inside, but he decided to ignore it. He jumped down the stairs as he checked the time. 10 o’clock in the morning. He had plenty of time. He could see the nearby church handing out cookies when he walked outside his apartment complex. Merry Christmas, they greeted, as they handed the snacks out to smiling children.

He stuck his hands into his pockets as he walked to the bus station, he could hear Christmas carols all over the place. Everything from funny covers by comedians, to quiet, touching ones done by singers. It was a Christmas, on a Sunday to boot. The streets were packed with people, the bus was of no exception. Were all of these people headed to Anyang?

“I hope she does well.”

He already told her that he’d go watch. Then again, he didn’t really have a choice given how she demanded his attendance. He looked outside the bus window, counting the trees lined outside. A happy Christmas, for all of us.

Maru put a hand into his coat pocket. He did prepare a gift. Thinking about it now, it was probably too big of a gift for people their age. Perfume and couple rings that she used to like, ones made of silver with a simple design. She often told him to save those gifts for the bank whenever he got them, but he never did miss that smile of hers that she tried to hide. He thought about calling her before giving up on it, he didn't want to be a bother to her right now.

Maru got off in front of the city hall, the street here was packed with people as well. Christmas was something else. He walked right into the hall since he didn't have much business here. The prelims began at 10am, so they should be about done with their first play. He quietly opened the closed doors to the auditorium. It was packed inside, just like last time. The only difference was that this time, the auditorium was filled with families, not industry workers.

Maru leaned back on the wall. There were only female students on the stage. An all-female high school? They were all dressed in white, giving off some sort of a sad vibe. The curtain call began before he could even get a sense of what the play was about. He really walked in at the perfect time.

"We'll have a fifteen minute intermission before the next play," the staff member said.

Chapter 148

The lights near the audience seats turned on and the audience started getting up one by one, Maru narrowed his eyes as he observed them.

'Quite a lot of students.'

It made sense that there would be a lot of families since it was Christmas, they probably came here after finding that free play sign outside. The students, though? What were the chances that a normal high schooler would come to watch a play?

"Myunghwa High now, right?"

"Yeah."

"I wonder how good they'll be."

"I hope they make a mistake, don't you?"

"Dream on. You think they'd make a mistake?"

It was a conversation from two passing high school girls. In fact, most students were talking about Myunghwa High right now. Maru could tell that most of these students were from various acting clubs.

'I guess they're pretty amazing, huh.'

Myunghwa High. The school that she went to. It wasn't very famous for its academics but for something else, their acting club. Considering how the school even made a special club room in their new building, they were really investing a ton of money into it.

'But our club's about to get kicked out.'

That was a little depressing to think about. He also knew that the graduate actors of Myunghwa High maintained a very good network among each other as well. Even famous actors could be seen roaming around during the school's festivals.

"Myunghwa's definitely taking one of the spots, so I guess we'll have to fight over the other one?"

"Pretty much. Ugh, I wonder when our school's going to pass the prelims."

"For real."

Myunghwa qualifying seemed to be set in stone at this point. How well would they do? He was getting pretty excited. After about ten minutes, the audience started coming back one by one. It actually felt like there were even more people than before, with most of them being students.

"Maru?"

One of the girls who was passing by started talking to him, Maru raised his head from looking at his wristwatch.

"Oh, it is you."

It was Yoojin. What was she doing here?

"Yoojin, get over here."

"Wait a second."

There were a few girls calling out to Yoojin.

"Acting club?"

"Yeah."

Yoojin turned around and told her friends to get going first.

"Did Woosung High come too?"

"No, by myself."

"Wow, you guys are really getting it on. For your girlfriend?"

Yoojin stood next to him. She took a hair tie and tied up her shoulder-length hair. Each time her hair swished to the side, a smell of lavender puffed into Maru's nose.

"You came with your club members, Yoojin?"

"Yeah. We don't have to watch the other schools, but Myunghwa High is a different story. Everyone was talking about how we had to watch it. Who knows? Maybe we'll even learn something."

"So you came all the way to Anyang? That's amazing. The prelims in your region's over?"

"Yesterday, yeah. We're definitely passing," Yoojin said with a nod.

"You sound confident."

“Of course. We did well. It wouldn’t make sense if we failed.”

“Nonsensical things are often pretty f... not funny.”

Maru quickly corrected himself when Yoojin raised her eyebrows. Jokes were more common amongst their exchanges now that they became friends. They practiced a lot together, so it only made sense that the main characters would become friends together.

“You saw her?”

“No. I didn’t want to distract her, so I’ll meet her afterwards.”

“Pft. You guys both think way too similarly.”

“You don’t need to go back over there?” Maru asked, pointing at the girls at the fourth row. They were Yoojin’s club members.

“It’s fine. They’re friends, so I don’t need to be careful of what I do around them. The seniors didn’t come.”

“You juniors work hard, don’t you?”

“The real goal is actually to just play around in Anyang! This is just our secondary objective.”

Ah, is that so. She did look like she was out to play, judging by the makeup she had on. She did look a little more mature thanks to it, but her childish personality was in plain sight.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Your makeup doesn’t look half bad. Nice job.”

“...Is that a compliment or an insult?”

“Depends on how you want to hear it.”

Maru quickly stepped aside as Yoojin raised her hand.

“They say violent women aren’t charming, you know.”

“I don’t need to look charming in front of someone like you.”

In the end, Maru got hit. It stung.

“You did that to yourself. I thought you were quiet and serious when I first saw you, but you’re turning out to be a tissue.”

“Tissue?”

“Light enough to fly away with a puff.”

Maru shrugged. He did feel like he changed a little after talking with Moonjoong. He was no longer observing life from the sidelines anymore, he stepped in to experience it. He didn’t deny his adult self, but at the same time he recognized his teenage self. That’s when he started talking a lot more easily with the kids around his age. Before this, he had to admit, he had a difficult time.

“Anyway, it’s Christmas,” Yoojin leaned on the wall behind her, “Merry Christmas.”

“You too.”

The girl extended her hand towards him. Did she want something?

“What, no gift?”

“I’m not Santa.”

“Tsk tsk, so cheap. You got a present for her, then?”

Her expression was kind of funny, so Maru ended up smiling. He took out the perfume and the box with the couple rings.

“What is it?”

“Perfume and couple rings.”

“Can I see?”

“Why would you? They’re not meant for you.”

“Girls know girls, you know? Did you even get something that would look good on her?”

Sorry, but I’ve lived with her for twenty years, Maru thought. He couldn’t say he knew everything about her, but... He probably knew more about her right now than most other people.

“Can’t I see?”

Maru sighed and opened the box a tiny bit. The rings were decorated with little bunnies. He picked them with her preferences in mind. Indeed, the wedding ring he got her didn’t look far off from this either.

“You’re going to be wearing that?”

Yoojin barely suppressed her laughter. Please stop laughing... he didn’t get this because he wanted to.

“Well... it’d look good on her though. You have good sense.”

Phew, that was a relief to hear. He had to wonder though, did she have the same tastes as her adult self right now? He’d be screwed if that wasn’t the case. He didn’t want to be made fun of for bringing something so childish looking.

“It’s about to begin. You’re going to watch from here?”

“Yup.”

Yoojin waved him farewell and walked back to her friends. The storm’s finally passed. Maru leaned back on the wall with his arms crossed, it was time to watch her play.

* * *

She practically ran away to the waiting room.

“It’s our turn. Get ready.”

“Y-yes!”

“What the. Are you nervous?”

She shook her head. She wasn't nervous. But... she saw something she shouldn't have seen.

‘Why were those two...’

She saw Maru when she got out of the waiting room. She was about to run over to say hello, but she noticed a girl right next to him. It was Yoojin. She's seen them together often, so she just had to go over... she couldn't do it. They looked too much like a couple. She knew that she was the one who was going out with Maru, but she felt afraid to approach them for some reason.

‘Why did I feel this way?’

She just had to walk up to him. Why did she feel jealous? She was getting depressed, too. Was Maru kind to all women around him? Or was it just to Yoojin? Which was worse? She knew that they had a lot to talk about since they were both main characters. She understood it, yet her heart couldn't accept it. She was being childish. So childish. She should've stepped in front of the two of them.

‘But why were they together?’

“Alright guys, focus! Let's go wild today.”

She came back to her senses at the club president's voice. She couldn't afford to think about other things right now.

* * *

Maru touched his lips. He was smiling. Just watching her on stage made him feel so happy.

‘I guess it's about to end?’

Myunghwa High's play was more than good, as expected. He'd watched many plays with Ganghwan at HyeHwa station and this play does not pale in comparison. As he expected, the play ended after just a few more minutes. She was the main character, so she appeared at the end of the curtain call. The entire club bowed towards the audience. Maru clapped.

“They're good,” Yoojin said, walking up to him.

“Go play with your friends. Why do you keep coming here?”

“What? Are you intimidated by me?”

Yoojin was smiling like a fox. Maru pushed her away with a finger, making her frown.

“What are you going to do now?”

“What?”

“You're going to be seeing her, won't you?”

“Of course.”

“Huhuhu.”

She was laughing like a witch. Was she planning on following him? He tried to escape the hall quickly, but Yoojin was quick on her foot.

“I can’t miss this. She gets really embarrassed by this stuff, so this has got to be fun.”

“Man, you’re evil.”

Yoojin even told her friends to get going without her. Maru scratched his eyebrows. Should he run away from her? No, he needs to come back here later anyway. He had no way to escape.

“I’ll be hiding.”

“Hah...”

“Hehe.”

Maru figured he might as well let her do whatever she wants. He walked over to the waiting room. He could see the actors from Myunghwa High working among everyone else. Among them, she was moving around props very busily. He might as well wait until she finishes. Maru bought himself a drink from the vending machine.

“What about me?”

“Use your own money.”

“Cheapskate. I bought her a meal last time, you know. Pay me back in her stead.”

Maru was at a loss for words. He scanned the vending machine for a really disgusting looking drink. Ah, ginseng. Bingo. Sure enough, the girl had a big frown on her face when she received it.

“I paid you back.”

“Ugh.”

Yoojin still drank it. Her face scrunched up in pain. Sweet victory.

“Looks like they’re over?”

The Myunghwa High students were coming out of the waiting room.

“Alright, those of you who need to get rid of their makeup, do it now. We’ll leave in 30 minutes, so be at the bus by then. Be sure to take pictures with your parents as well.”

The students all split up with the president’s word. The bus... Ah, he remembered seeing one outside. He vaguely recalled seeing the name of Myunghwa High on it.

“As expected of Myunghwa High... They even rented a bus. Our school should take after them,” Yoojin commented.

The club members were all headed towards their parents, it looked like the parents were heavily invested with the club as well. She was standing among the others all alone by herself. Was her mother not with her? Maru walked up to greet her.

“You were good.”

“...Ah.”

She smiled at him awkwardly. Maru knew that smile well. She always smiled that way when she didn't like something. She was good at arguing for what she wanted a lot of the time, but whenever she couldn't, she smiled like that. This didn't feel good.

“Um, thanks for coming.”

She wasn't being normal. Why wasn't she as energetic as she usually was?

“Did something happen?”

He decided to ask directly. She looked away. Something was wrong for sure. But before he was about to ask if something happened, she walked away somewhere else. He watched her for a second before walking to follow her. He could feel Yoojin following close behind. Once he got out of the hall, he could see her looking around for something.

“What are you doing?”

“No, it's, just... it's nothing.”

She tried to run away again. Maru wasn't a fan of playing hide and seek like this, so he grabbed her wrist.

“Why are you running away? That's not like you.”

“I'm not running.”

She was sensitive to the word 'running' as always. She glared at him for a second, but she immediately became depressed again. It was kind of endearing to watch.

“What's wrong?”

“.....”

“I'm sorry, but I can't read your mind.”

Well, only kind of. He could look into it and see what the other side was thinking every once in a while. He didn't want to use it on those who he held dear. He would feel like he was cheating them if he did.

“I just feel pathetic.”

She bit her bottom lip.

“Pathetic about what?”

“Just everything!”

She shouted. She was a mess today. How did she act so well today?

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No! No, yes!”

“What did I do?”

“T-that’s...”

She closed her mouth. She looked at the floor for a few seconds before raising her head. She was... crying. Why? For what? What was wrong?

“You! You didn’t even start acting until recently, so how are you so good?!”

“...Is that bad?”

“No! Not at all!”

“Then what’s the issue?”

“I’m the issue. I feel pathetic. Like an idiot.”

Tears were dripping from her face. Ah, he remembered now. He fought her a few times already in the past. Every time they did, she would cry. She always blamed herself, too, never pointing fingers on anyone else for her anger.

“You have no problems. You’re not pathetic, nor are you stupid.”

“.....”

Maru hugged her, he could feel her crying in his arms. She was such a strong woman and yet she was so weak right now. He waited until she calmed down. She’s a smart woman, so she should come back to her senses quickly.

“I saw.”

She was still sniffing a little.

“What?”

“...You were with Yoojin.”

“What about it?”

“I know it’s not anything special. It’s just... You guys get along so well together...”

She was young. He’d realized now that she was very different right now compared to her 25-year-old self. She was an entirely different human being compared to herself in her forties. What should he do to calm her down? He wasn’t good at talking, so he had to do the next best thing.

“You worried about something so stupid.”

He hugged her. Tightly.

“.....!”

She struggled for a bit. She calmed down quickly after a few pats.

“You were honest with me, so I’ll be honest with you too.”

“W-what?”

“I’m going to marry you.”

“...What?”

“I’m confessing in advance.”

She pushed him away with both of her arms.

“You’re crazy! M-marry? What?!”

“What, I can’t?”

She became quiet again with a troubled expression.

“Ah, were you jealous, by the way?”

“I wasn’t!”

“Liar.”

“...Ugh.”

She looked like she might cry again if he teased her more. Maru stopped here and grabbed her hand. He looked her straight in the eye, he could feel her hands tense a little. The world around them became completely silent. Maru lowered his head slowly. He could see her eyes getting wider as his face got closer to hers.

“You’re supposed to close them here.”

* * *

“...Wow.”

Yoojin looked at the two of them dumbly. She followed Maru because it looked like things were about to get fun, she just ended up getting jealous instead.

“My daughter’s pretty wild, isn’t she?”

Right then, Yoojin heard a voice behind her. She looked back in surprise, there was a grinning woman standing behind her.

“Kids nowadays go into things so fast, don’t they?”

“W-what? What?”

Yoojin was confused. Daughter? Did the woman just say, daughter? Could it be...

“Now now, us spectators should just leave.”

Yoojin nodded. She’d get in a lot of trouble if she got caught here.

“By the way.”

"Yes?"

"I'm a little annoyed she didn't tell me."

Why did the woman's smiling face look so scary right now? Yoojin wanted to go back to her friends as quickly as she could right now.

Chapter 149

Maru took his lips off and looked at her as if nothing had happened. Her eyebrows shot up to the sky, fell back down, and then shot up again.

"Y-you!"

"What?"

"Are you crazy?"

"Very normal."

She didn't say anything for a moment. Her lips twisted for a second before opening back up again. She looked very, very surprised.

"Who told you to do that?!"

"I couldn't?"

"That's..."

"I really took my time with it on purpose. I tried to give you as much time as I could."

"Are you really saying that right now?"

She shook her head sideways.

"T-they didn't see, did they?"

"Who? Your club members?"

She nodded lightly. Maru looked behind him, he couldn't see Yoojin anymore. She probably left after seeing what was going on. In any case, they were alone.

"There's no one."

"Hah."

"What? You don't like being seen with me?"

"Of course I do!"

"Really?"

"....."

"Really really?"

Her frown was deepening the more he asked her. He wanted to tease her a bit more but decided to stop there though. He didn't want her to cry further, so he took out the gift in his pocket.

"Here."

She looked at his gift once and at him once.

"It's heavy, take it."

"What is it?"

"Merry Christmas. It's a gift from Santa. I'm not supposed to give them to kids who cry, but I'll make an exception. I'm a very nice Santa."

Maru wiped her eyes with his jacket sleeve, she stepped back with a flinch.

"Want to blow your nose, too?"

"I'm fine."

She wiped her eyes as she sniffled, she resembled a squirrel washing its face in the morning. As weird as it sounded, she was really fun to tease at her age. What happened during the next eight years? What turned this girl into a vixen who waved a condom at him with a grin?

'Maybe it's her mother.'

Maru's ears tickled for a moment. Was someone swearing at him from afar? She opened the box he gave her. He looked at her carefully. She still had a frown on her face, but her eyes were clearly smiling. Maru took out one of the couple rings and grabbed her hand.

"W-what are you doing?"

"We need to see if it fits."

Maru put it on her ring finger, the itty bitty rabbit ring fit perfectly on her. She raised her hand up to observe it a little more carefully.

"It looks good on you."

"I look like a kid."

"Don't you like this kind of stuff?"

She couldn't refute him. She took off her ring with an annoyed look.

"Our school bans accessories."

"That's a shame."

Maru put the other ring on his finger. A grown man, wearing some rabbit-shaped ring... It was a bit hilarious to think about, but at least they were connected through it.

"You're going to keep it on?"

"Might as well since I bought it."

“You don’t look good with it on.”

“I know.”

“Then why?”

“It’s a sign that I’m taken.”

Her face reddened immediately.

“Everyone says couple rings work better the more childish they look, so this is a really good one.”

“I’m not going to wear it.”

She handed the ring back to him.

“Well, I should give it to someone else then. It’d be a shame to throw it away. I wonder if Yoojin would like this.”

Maru put the ring back in his pocket and looked at her. She had a scary expression on her face. Maru smiled as he took the ring back out.

“I’m telling you this again. I’m yours. Don’t worry or be suspicious of me. I don’t want to force your expectations of me back on yourself though. You do whatever you want. I want you to like me and only me for sure. I’m not going to force that on you.”

He carefully put the ring back on her finger. This time, she was quiet as he put it on.

“I’ll just have to work a little overtime making sure your heart doesn’t get stolen by someone else.”

He turned the ring a little so that the rabbit would be on top before letting go. She brought her hands to her chest. She was looking at the ring.

“I’m sorry if I was being too forceful. I won’t do it again.”

It was true that Maru was desperate to have her. He was lying when he said it would be fine for her to have her heart stolen by someone else. That, of course, was a white lie. He didn’t want to ruin the relationship by being too desperate. He handed her the perfume after, she didn’t say anything still.

“Merry Christmas again. I hope you like the perfume.”

He did come on a little strong at a girl who’s never dated before, maybe he was the one who was too worried. Perhaps he should’ve taken his sweet time? Well, whatever. He didn’t have any regrets. Maru decided to head off though, he didn’t want to become too nervous in front of her. Maru turned back slowly, but a hand grabbed him before he could walk away.

It was her. She pulled him back and grabbed his collars. Before he even realized, they were staring at each other face to face.

“Stop doing whatever you want.”

Her lips closed over his, it was a surprise for Maru this time around. Looking at her expression relaxed him immediately though. In fact, he even wanted to burst out into laughter. Her eyebrows were

wrinkled because she clenched her eyes tightly. He thought about putting a tongue in there but quickly abandoned the thought, he didn't want to get slapped. He put his hands around her hips, it took his everything trying to stop them from moving a little further down.

"Hah!"

She snapped her head back with a loud huff, her face was completely red. It looked like her face was close to exploding, so Maru tried poking it.

"Hah, hah, hah."

She was huffing like she just ran in a marathon. Maru smiled as he let go of his hands around her, she didn't step back.

"There's one thing I want to make clear."

She sounded a little mad.

"What is it?"

"I like the ring, for now."

"Thanks."

"I also like you too."

That little strand of nervousness snapped in his chest making Maru sighed subconsciously.

"I'm also going to return what you said right back at you. You should go meet other women, too! I'm going to work hard too. So that you'll continue to like me."

She spat out her words before finally stepping back.

"By the way, you..."

"What?"

"H-how many times have you kissed people?"

"Would you believe me if I told you that it was my first time?"

"Liar!"

"No, really."

"T-then how were you so natural with it?"

"Men like to study stuff like this, you know."

Maru gestured for another kiss playfully, her hand immediately flew to slap his lips. It kind of hurt.

"Pervert."

"Says the lady who just gave me a passionate kiss mere seconds ago. You even grabbed my collars. Are you into that stuff?"

“Hey!”

He hugged her without permission one more time. Her round head only reached up to his chin. She had such a wide forehead.

“Thanks for being jealous. Thanks for telling me that I’m worth something to you. I was actually nervous that you didn’t really care for me.”

It was better to be frank, at a time like this. Maru decided to tell her the truth without hiding anything. It might burden the listener a bit, but that was exactly what Maru wanted. It was mean if one were to think about it, but Maru wanted to imprint as much of himself as he could in her mind.

“It’s unfair... How good you are at talking.”

She reached out to grab his coat for the first time, she didn’t seem to have the courage to actually hug him just yet. He did feel slightly greedy, but he decided to stop it here. He was glad she already had the courage to kiss him.

“Merry Christmas,” she said.

It would’ve been nice if this continued for a bit longer. Unfortunately, their sweet time was interrupted by a text message. She raised her head and Maru let go of her. She took out her phone to check the message.

“Hup.”

She inhaled sharply before looking around like a meerkat. She was incredibly alert, her cheeks were turning completely pale in fear.

“What’s wrong?”

“S-saw.”

“What?”

“She saw!”

What did she mean? She handed the phone to him with a frightened expression. There was a very short line written on the screen.

[Try not to bump your teeth. It’s absolutely embarrassing.]

One of his cheeks twitched. This didn’t feel good. He raised his eyes to take a look at the sender of the message.

‘Ah, dear mother-in-law.’

He swallowed nervously as he looked around. Was she still around looking at them?

“Y-your mother saw us?”

“Can’t you tell?”

“T-that’s troublesome.”

"It's your fault!"

"...I'm leaving. Good luck."

He was serious. Reincarnation or not, there were still people he didn't want to have to deal with. One of the worst amongst those people was his mother-in-law. She was a good person, of course. One of the nicest in fact. She was someone who cared about her daughter's troubles very much.

At the same time, mother-in-law positively loved to tease people. If she found out her daughter got a boyfriend... well, he need not imagine the consequences. She'd be smiling in front of you as she asked you some incredibly embarrassing questions. He still remembered the first time he went to her wife's house, the first thing his mother-in-law asked him was if he was carrying a condom.

Maru turned back and tried to leave, consumed by his survival instincts. She didn't let him go. As a matter of fact, she was smiling with vengeance on her face.

"Can you let me go?"

"Hmph, don't want to."

"I'll do good from now on. Please?"

"Too late."

His neck was starting to tingle. This was bad. He started looking behind him slowly, there were Yoojin and a pretty woman in her early forties.

"Nice to meet you."

Winter. Was this what frogs feel like in winter when they wake up for a moment during their hibernation only to be confronted with a snake? He could almost hear someone from the distance welcoming him to hell.

* * *

"Everyone's here, right?"

"Yes."

"We're leaving. Make sure you didn't forget anything."

She checked her belongings again at the president's behest. She wasn't missing anything. Thank goodness.

"Phew, it's over for now," her friend commented.

She nodded with a big sigh. The prelim was hard, but that weirdo made her feel even more nervous.

"What's that?"

Her friend must've seen the perfume in her bag. She was curious, so she took it out as well. The bottle was shaped like a droplet.

"What is it?"

“Perfume.”

“Perfume?”

Her friend looked curious. She took off the cap and tried spraying a little on her wrist. She’d never used a perfume before, but she knew roughly where she was supposed to spray.

“Mm, it’s good.”

Her friend responded first. She closed her eyes as she took another whiff. The scent was incredibly fresh, like a breeze passing right under her nose. It wasn’t strong at all, she liked it.

“Doesn’t this fit guys more though?”

“I think so, but I still like it.”

“Who did you get it from?”

She just smiled in response.

“Santa.”

“Santa?”

Her friend only seemed more confused.

* * *

“Dig in.”

“Yes? Ah, yes.”

He was uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. Sure, the cafe they were in was nice, but his future mother-in-law... Plus, the reason why they were sitting together was that she saw them kissing... This couldn’t go well for him.

“I’m not going to scold you, so relax a little.”

“Y-you don’t have to be so polite, ma’am.”

“Oh? Sure.”

She was just coming right in. Maru decided to put on a fake smile. He couldn’t smile in any other way. Their coffee arrived. The drink was a welcomed change to their silence, but Maru wasn’t able to even take a sip. She threw him a question just as he grabbed his cup.

“Alright. So, what did you like about my daughter? I hope you can be honest and persuasive. Don’t give me a bad reason.”

Mother-in-law grinned. She was pretty, but that’s not what’s important right now. If he didn’t give the woman the right answer... He’d have a bad time.

“Can I think for a bit, please?”

“Of course.”

He needed to take care. It seemed that Santa decided to give him a box of coals, just because he decided to tease his girlfriend.

Chapter 150

“Shall we drink in the meantime?”

“Ah, yes.”

Thank goodness she offered him a drink. He caught his breath as he took a sip, he needed to explain what he liked about her daughter. This felt worse than writing his college entrance exam since tests always had a set answer. You just had to read the problem and figure out the test writer’s intent, but this didn’t. He might fail even if he came up with a good answer. Then again, that was what most essay questions were like.

“Tick, tock, tick, tock.”

That wasn’t an actual clock ticking, it was just his mother-in-law making sounds with a smile. This lady knew very well how to make a person feel nervous.

“Hold on.”

She took out a phone from her bag.

“Yeah, honey?”

It must be her daughter. Maru tensed up even more. The woman’s lips were curling up into a mischievous smile again, that wasn’t a good sign.

“Why did I come when I said I wouldn’t? Well, I finished writing pretty early today. So I wanted to come over to surprise you. Who knew you’d be the one to surprise me instead?”

She gave Maru a short glance. All he could do was to smile.

“Your boyfriend’s smiling at me.”

She put her phone on speaker mode.

- Mom! You’re with Maru?

The voice on the other end sounded incredibly nervous, Maru wanted to send his thoughts and prayers. He really did. All he could do right now was just to hope that the topic of conversation would change to anything other than him. Having to deal with his mother-in-law was too stressful. His mother-in-law motioned him to be quiet.

“So he’s called Maru?”

- That’s not important. Why are you two together? Did you ask him anything weird? Did you?

“We weren’t talking about much. He has a heavy mouth. I haven’t gotten a single answer from him yet. Oh, so troublesome.”

Oops. He forgot about that. Time to think again. He needed to come up with a good answer.

- What are you asking him?!

"Just why he likes you. Stuff like that."

- Mom!

"I'm gonna hang up. Bye."

She closed her phone with just that. It rang in a flash again, but she didn't pick it back up. So it was his turn again, huh. He took in a breath and got ready to answer her.

"Let's go outside."

"Yes?"

She stood up first, Maru followed her in a hurry. He tried to walk past her to try and pay for the food, but she stopped him.

"I don't like being paid for."

Maru put his card back into his wallet. They stepped outside. It was winter, but it didn't feel so cold for some reason. Was it because of how nervous he was?

"Um..."

He still hadn't thought of a good answer just yet. Before he could answer her, she opened her mouth first.

"Please don't hurt my daughter."

The way his mother-in-law stared back at him and the way she politely, firmly, and yet sternly said those words... It made Maru forget to breathe for a second. She bowed to him lightly. Maru returned the bow.

"Have you heard about our family from my daughter?"

"I heard her father passed away a long time ago."

"What else did she tell you?"

Maru slowly raised his head, he decided to just be honest here. He threw away his filter and said everything. Why she liked acting, why she liked to hum, why she smiled or cried whenever she hummed, what happened with her friends, and what she liked to eat. Just about everything she'd told him came out of his mouth. It felt like he talked for some time. His feet were starting to succumb to the weather. Once he finished, he looked back at his mother-in-law's eyes. She was smiling.

"I'm not the type of person to trust others very easily. But... I'm also not stuck-up enough to distrust someone that my daughter trusts."

She nodded before stepping forward and grabbed Maru's hand with both of her hands.

"Please come over sometime."

She sounded a little more relaxed again, it felt like a wall broke down between them. Just before he could sigh in relief, she whispered a few words to him.

“But please think before swooping in for a kiss. You don’t want to give her or me a trauma, do you?”

“Y-y-yes!”

“I’ll be more casual with you the next time we meet. Goodbye.”

Maru stuttered from shock. He could feel cold sweat running down his back. Only after she disappeared from his vision completely was he able to sigh in relief.

“...This is too much.”

It felt like he wasn’t able to do anything other than sleep at home now, but Santa wasn’t ready to make him experience happiness just yet. He got a call. From her.

- Hey! What did you tell her?!

“Hah.”

A mountain after a mountain.

* * *

“Don’t do anything stupid just because it’s vacation, understood?”

“Yes!”

“You all answer nicely, sure. Go clean up your desks. Don’t you dare come back after school closes asking to go back inside.”

The teacher looked at the clock before giving Daemyung a slight glance, Daemyung opened the TV drawer to click on the ‘on’ button. The TV took a second or two to load before the face of the principal appeared.

- Hm hm, ah ah.

That alone was already enough to make them want to fall asleep. Did all principals just have the natural ability to make people sleepy?

“Take this.”

“Thanks.”

Maru popped Dojin’s candy in his mouth, the mint definitely helped. It was the 26th. The day after Christmas and also the day before winter break.

- Us Woosung High...

Well, there he goes again. The homeroom teacher was already sleeping on a chair. One by one, the students started drifting away into dreamland as well.

“When do they announce the results?”

“Thursday.”

“Will we pass?”

“Who knows.”

The results of the prelim would come out on Thursday and the regional finals would start on the following Tuesday. After that was the prelim for the nationals.

- We, who won't break even through the cold wind...

“I wonder when he's planning on finishing that speech.”

“Dunno, when his throat hurts?”

Maru put his phone back in his pocket as he turned to the TV, he could see the principal still flipping through the pages of his speech. Probably at least two pages left to go?

“What happened with you and Iseul, by the way?”

He got reminded of it all of the sudden. The question made Dojin flinch and turn his way. That's quite a reaction.

“W-what?”

“Oho, so something really did happen?”

“Nothing happened, really.”

“So why are you surprised?”

“.....”

Dojin leaned towards Maru after a few seconds.

“I... I think I like Iseul.”

“Why are you being so secretive over something so obvious?”

“Obvious?”

“Daemyung probably knows as well.”

“Liar. Stop lying. You think I'm that obvious?”

...Oh? Maru gestured at him to wait for a little. Once the principal finished his speech after a few minutes, the teacher woke up from his nap and stood up.

“Alright, take your homework. Do them well. Don't smoke. Don't do anything stupid. I'll see you in February. Ah, class pres, follow me out after this. Dismissed.”

“Waaah!”

The whole class started shouting. The infectious shouting spread through the hall and all the way to the other floors. Finally, their break had begun.

“Daemyung.”

Maru dodged around all the other kids and walked up to Daemyung.

“Hm?”

“Do you know who Dojin likes?”

“Is it Iseul?”

Dojin’s expression turned dumb.

“What do I do?”

“What do you mean, ‘what do I do’? Just do what you have to do.”

“Give me some tips.”

Dojin’s insistence didn’t change no matter how much Maru tried to push the boy away.

“So you’ll do what I say, then?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not going to go back on your word?”

“Okay.”

Maru put his hands in his pockets and walked out, Dojin and Daemyung followed behind him. He walked to the other side of the hallway to the classroom inside, everyone was still sitting inside. The teacher here must’ve just finished his speech.

“Why are we here?”

“Why do you think?”

He opened the classroom door and looked around. He could see Iseul sitting in the front.

“Eh?”

Iseul waved her hand at Maru, so he waved back.

“Why are you guys here?”

Maru grabbed Dojin’s shoulders and put the boy in front of her. He didn’t even want to give advice. So, he might as well send the boy straight into battle. Dojin was just standing there fiddling with his fingers, Iseul seemed to have understood what was happening at this point though.

“I wanted to leave a kid here.”

“To me?”

“Yeah.”

Iseul thought for a second before grabbing Dojin’s shoulders with a nod. Maru observed Dojin stiffen up more and more before turning away.

“Hey, hey, hey!”

He could hear the boy call out to him from behind, but he ignored it. This wasn't his problem. Iseul also seemed interested anyhow.

"Well then..."

"Time to leave?"

Maru nodded at Daemyung's response. To begin with, he didn't even have time to play with Dojin after school. He already had other arrangements. Well, arrangements that Daemyung had set up. He was just joining in.

"Mintae, was it?"

"Yeah."

"Seoul, right?"

"Myungdong."

"We'll have to hurry."

Yoon Mintae. Maru'd met him once before through Junmin. Someone who works in staging? The guy was in his twenties, if he remembered right.

"It'll be fun."

Daemyung had a rare look of confidence which made Maru excited as well.

"Well, we're making a play together after all."

He seemed like he was stating a fact, not a statement.

* * *

"Hah."

Yurim sighed lightly as she took her lips off. Her heart was beating loudly in her chest. Did Geunseok feel the same way?

"Want to drink something?"

Geunseok was looking at the menu casually as if nothing had happened. Yurim rubbed her lips lightly. They kissed just now, right?

"Want cola?"

"Hm? Ah, yeah."

"Wait a second."

Yurim looked at Geunseok desperately, it was her first kiss. She was trembling and she was a little scared. It was Geunseok though, so she allowed it. It felt soft and their breathing was warm, but she didn't feel any emotions for some reason. It almost felt like... She was showing love to a wall.

'It must be because he's nervous, right?'

Must be. That must be the case. Wait, what if that wasn't the case? But just as she was about to move onto doing something else, she saw Geunseok's phone vibrate on the sofa. She knew she shouldn't, but she grabbed it anyway. It didn't have a password either.

It was a text message. Most of his texts were with someone named Suyeon, their texts were particularly expressive. Yurim's face turned incredibly pale. She checked the messages he'd exchanged with her, most of his responses were curt. She thought that was just what his personality was like, but that wasn't it at all. He was incredibly sweet towards this Suyeon person.

She looked at the door nervously, it didn't look like he'd come back any time soon. She flipped to the photos tab quickly. His photos with her were all on the bottom. The recent ones were all... with a woman she didn't recognize. An older woman. Why did this woman look so familiar?

"Drama."

It was an actress. The two were smiling in a picture together. Yurim's teeth started clacking together. She'd felt this way before, back then when she was about to be kidnapped.

"Geunseok's... Supposed to be relying on me."

She couldn't take her eyes off of the other woman.

* * *

"You aren't going to sing?"

Geunseok looked at Yurim after he stepped back inside. Man, it was so boring even playing with her nowadays. What was this girl even good at?

"Ah... it's nothing."

Yurim smiled back at him in response. What an average smile. Well, what could he do? The girl still cared about him. He was tired of her now, but he still kept her around because she cared so much for him.

"Let's sing together."

"Yeah."

"Why are you so stiff? Oh, was it the kiss? Did you like it that much?"

"Mm? Ah... Aha. Yeah. It was good."

"Oh, so cute."

Geunseok kissed her cheek lightly, her cheeks were soft. Geunseok's eyes naturally wandered a little further down. He could see some skin under her shirt.

"Song... This one seems good."

Yurim stood up from her seat. Well, he might as well go for it next time. Geunseok smiled before standing up himself.

