

## Once Again 241

### Chapter 241

"Are all of these hand made as well?" Dowook asked as he put down the clothes in one corner of the self studies classroom on the 5th floor. There was a police uniform, some strange shirt with thin metal chains on the shoulder and a leather jacket that looked like it would clearly outline any body figure. Some of those clothes could be bought from stores, but the police uniform and the shirt with the chain clearly seemed hand made.

"One of our OBs did clothing design and apparently, that person helped out even after graduation. I think that seonbae made this one as well."

"I knew it."

"Can you take the plastic wrap off and see if there's anything wrong with them? We'd have to stitch them back if there are any rips," Daemyung said to Bangjoo. Bangjoo replied in a loud voice and sat down on the spot before starting to go through the clothes.

"Well," Dowook replied grumpily to Daemyung who was smiling at him. Even though he clearly expressed that he was not okay with this, Daemyung kept looking at him. Dowook felt that this guy was getting sneakier by the day.

In the end, though, Dowook sat down.

"Dowook, those are yours, so try them on," the one Daemyung pointed to was the shirt with the chain.

"This one?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, my role might be a delinquent, but isn't this too overboard? It's not like the delinquent is into heavy metal or something."

"Ah, do you think?"

Dowook sighed and took off the plastic wrap first. The shirt was black and red. It wasn't bad to the point of being unusable if the chains were taken off. It wasn't a bad costume if the delinquent happened to be in a bike gang or something. Dowook looked for any flaws both on the inside and the outside and tried them on once. He put the clothes on and stood in front of the mirror to see if they fit him or not.

"Seonbae-nim. It suits you," Bangjoo spoke from behind him.

"You're saying I look like a delinquent?"

"Yes! You totally look like a gangster."

This guy did not know his manners. Dowook chuckled before taking the clothes off. It didn't hinder his movement. He thought that he could use this costume once the chains were taken off.

"Why are you staring at me like that?"

Daemyung had been staring at him for a while. When he asked, he replied back with a smile.

"I was just thinking that you're actually quite thorough."

"Once I said I will do something, I will do it properly, so don't you worry about that. Rather than that, I can take off the chains right?"

"I think we can ask the dry cleaners to do it. But I think it looks cooler with it on though...."

"This looks cool?"

"I, isn't it?"

"Hell no."

Daemyung looked at the chains with pity. Dowook packed the costume in the plastic bag again.

"We checked all of them, right?"

"Can we leave these here? Others might come in."

Although the self studies classroom was rarely used, students could still use this space since midterms were approaching. Although they were using it like their clubroom, it was originally intended to be used for studying so they couldn't just lock the door.

"It's fine. Teacher Taesik already got permission. He told the others that a study group will book the room...."

"So he lied, even though he's a teacher."

"...Perhaps studying acting is also a form of studying?"

"You're sounding more and more like Maru these days, making excuses like that."

"Y, you think so?"

Dowook gathered the costumes up into one spot and piled them up. He was used to tidying up. His father worked at the petrol station, his mother worked at a company, and his sister left home. As he grew up in an environment where he had to do the household chores, he did not like seeing things untidy. He suddenly had the thought that perhaps the reason why he researched about bicycles and even bought tools to fix them was because his subconscious told him to do everything by himself.

"I'll go downstairs for a bit," Daemyung suddenly said. He then stood up.

"Where?"

"To lock the container. I felt it when I took the clothes out, but it was really hot in there, so I opened it so that it could cool down a little."

Daemyung brushed off the strands of threads that stuck to his school uniform as he stood up. He was about to leave when he turned around.

"Wanna go with me? I'll treat you to some ice cream."

"It's not that you want to eat it as well?"

Hearing those words, Daemyung silently smiled.

"I thought you were trying to lose weight."

"Today's the last day. Bangjoo, you can come too."

"Yes!"

Dowook shrugged his shoulders and followed him.

\* \* \*

"Huh?"

Daemyung met Jiyeon and Aram in the convenient store. However, the two of them acted strange. Aram had a smirk on her face while Jiyeon did her best to hold her back.

"Seonbae!"

Aram waved her hand and greeted them. There were quite a lot of students since it was lunch time, and Aram's loud voice instantly gathered their attention. Daemyung was momentarily frightened by the numerous gazes and quickly went up to them.

"What is it so suddenly?"

"Seonbae, you know...," Aram was about to say something when Jiyeon covered Aram's mouth with her hands. Even Daemyung was surprised by the usually meek girl's bold actions.

"Oh, it's, uh, nothing, seonbae-nim."

Jiyeon smiled awkwardly and stepped sideways. At that moment, Daemyung saw that Jiyeon was pinching Aram's waist. Very hard, too. Aram also stepped sideways, teary-eyed.

"What's going on?"

"Hehe, it's nothing."

Aram seemed to have some business with him until just moments ago, but she instantly changed her attitude when Jiyeon looked as though she was about to cry. Daemyung was curious about what was happening, but he felt that he shouldn't ask.

"S, seonbae-nim. Wh, what are you going to eat? I'll buy it for you," Jiyeon carefully asked. Daemyung shook his head and spoke.

"I'll treat you. What do you two girls want to eat?"

"I want milk," Aram responded. Jiyeon hesitated for a moment before replying 'the same one you're getting, seonbae-nim.'

"Okay, wait just a moment. Dowook, Bangjoo. Are you two okay with ice cream?"

Both of them nodded.

"Oh yes, seonbae-nim. I saw that the container box was open...," Jiyeon inquired nervously.

“That? I opened it on purpose. The inside was too hot. We have to check on the props in the afternoon but I thought it would get too hot if I just left them like that, so I left it open just a little.”

“Oh, that’s it,” Jiyoong smiled as she said that. Her cheeks dimpled slightly. Daemyung absent-mindedly watched as Jiyoong brushed her hair away from her eyebrows with her hand before flinching. Aram had a suspicious smile on her face.

“M, ma’am!”

Daemyung quickly turned around and ordered the items. His heart was racing. He was worried that Jiyoong might think strange of him and turned around, but fortunately, Aram was talking to Jiyoong like normal. He wondered if he saw wrongly. He sighed and turned around after getting the items from the lady.

“Here you go.”

He handed out the milk and the ice cream. He subconsciously smiled when Jiyoong received her ice cream with her two hands. Of course, he soon came to himself and looked away. After all, Jiyoong might feel uncomfortable if some misunderstandings occurred.

“I, I don’t see Maru anywhere. I thought he was going to the cafeteria.”

“Maru-seonbae was in class though.”

“In class? In my class?”

“Yes.”

Daemyung was curious about why these two went to the 2nd year electric engineering class, but did not ask. He didn’t want to be nosy.

While the others chatted, Daemyung sneaked out. He had to lock up the container.

“Seonbae-nim. Where are you going?”

Jiyoong had caught up already.

“To go to the container. You don’t need to follow me. You should go back to class and get some rest.”

“No, I’ll help you,” saying that, Jiyoong quietly followed him. She was really kind. Daemyung felt proud since he felt that he had a good junior. At the same time, a sense of duty to show her his good side as her senior welled up inside him.

“Oh, seonbae-nim. It’s a little weird to call you... club president, right?”

“Y, you can just call me however you want. It’s not like being the club president is anything special. You can call me whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“R, right? Then, seonbae....nim is a little too weird, right? I’ll call you just seonbae in the future. A, are you okay with that?”

“Y, yeah! Call me whatever you’re comfortable with. I don’t care at all.”

Jiyoon smiled back at him.

“Uhm, seonbae.”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for last time. I thought I didn’t get to thank you properly. Sorry about that.”

“Not at all. Rather than that, you look okay now. You are much brighter than before.”

“R, really?”

“Yeah,” after replying, Daemyung uttered a short breath. This was the first time he talked to a girl like this outside of practice. He became nervous and quickened his steps. He did this so that they could arrive at the container before they ran out of things to talk about.

However, not long later, he had to slow down. Jiyoon, who was following him, was panting. He walked by her side and the two walked to the back of the school. They did not say a single word as they walked. Daemyung was very uneasy, but Jiyoon had a calm - and perhaps a little joyful - expression. It seemed as though something good had happened to her today.

“Huh? Why is it wide open?”

Arriving at the container, Daemyung wondered why it was wide open. He remembered opening it just a little.

“Is it because of the wind?”

“It wasn’t like that when we came around.”

Jiyoon tilted her head as well. Daemyung took another step forward towards the orange-colored container. At that moment, a strong wind blew on his face.

“...!”

The wind contained a disgusting smell. It was the smell of paint. Not just any paint, but the waterproof paint that Maru bought. Jiyoon seemed to have smelled the stench of burning rubber as well and frowned.

“Can you take a step back?”

“Seonbae!”

Daemyung made Jiyoon step back just in case anything happened. He covered his nose and walked forward. As he walked forward, the sunlight that covered the entrance of the container was lifted, showing what the inside looked like. Daemyung frowned and walked into the container.

“What is all...”

It was green everywhere. No, some places had spray paint on as well. The problem was that some costumes and props were covered in paint as well. Daemyung coughed and first took out the costume within his reach. When it was exposed to the sunlight, its horrible condition could be seen. Even though

it was a denim jacket, half of it was colored green. The white mourning clothes had black paint everywhere. From those alone, it was clear that everything was messed up.

“Seonbae....”

Jiyeon’s expression paled in fright and she covered her mouth. She should have been surprised as well. Someone clearly did this with malicious intent. Daemyung first took out his phone. He then pressed his shortcut key. After some signalling sounds, Maru’s voice could be heard over the phone. Daemyung cut Maru mid way through his question and spoke hurriedly.

“Maru! Come down to the container quickly!”

\* \* \*

A burden. This referred to a heavy load carried by a person. When something refreshing happened, it is expressed as ‘a heavy burden was lifted off one’s shoulders’. Geunseok realized what that felt like today. He really felt refreshed. No, he was thrilled. The glee when he found out that there was no one behind school, the feeling of awe when he saw that the container was open, as well as the excitement of finding paint inside. Geunseok opened the paint containers rapidly and poured it out on everything he saw. He was unable to contain his smile while watching the green paint draw a perfect parabola into every object inside the container. As he watched the props getting tainted, those bastards popped into his head, and a feeling of triumph welled up inside him when he thought about how Maru would never catch the culprit.

Fire was dangerous. He was a man with common sense. He had to finish things on a level that wouldn’t get him into big trouble even if he was found out. In that sense, paint was perfect for the job. It made all the objects useless after all. On top of that, there was that stench. Although it would soon go away since it was volatile, they wouldn’t be able to use the container for the time being. He was so happy because he could pressure them like this.

“Did something good happen to you?”

The girl next to him asked. It was a girl with long straight hair. She tied it up when she came to school to avoid the eyes of the head-of-the-year teacher, but she untied them once she was in class. Geunseok inwardly liked this girl since she looked more mature than her peers.

“Do I look like it?”

“Yeah.”

The girl giggled. She clearly had good feelings towards him.

Geunseok smiled.

Today was the best.

## **Chapter 242**

The voice sounded urgent. Maru, who was relaxing on his seat after drinking coffee first looked at the time. 10 minutes remained until the 5th period. He hung up on the phone and left through the back door. He climbed down the central stairs and arrived at the first floor before leaving through the left

door of the building. He went past the cafeteria and headed towards the back of the school. He saw three people from the acting club there.

Before he even asked what was up, the distinct smell of oil-based paint tickled his nose. He frowned and approached the container. The first things he saw were the costumes colored in black and green. He also saw the despairing Daemyung, as well as the uneasy Jiyeon and Aram duo.

"I don't think this was a result of a spill."

Hearing his words, the three of them nodded. At that moment, Dowook and Bangjoo arrived at the container as well. Both of them were panting.

"Maru, you're here."

"Yeah."

"Ha, shit. Bangjoo and I made rounds just to see if the fucker that did this was still nearby, but we came up with nothing."

Maru nodded and first left the container. He was in there only for a brief moment but he felt dizzy already.

"For now, put those costumes in the container."

"...Okay."

Daemyung sighed as he did as Maru instructed him to. Maru looked at Daemyung before stepping on the latch of the door and climbing to the top of the container. Right now, he had to ventilate the container. He opened all the ventilation latches on the corners of the container. These were usually closed to block off rain.

He then jumped off the roof. He did all he could right now so now he had to know what happened.

"I'm sorry, seonbae-nim. I should have closed it when I saw that it was open."

"No, seonbae. I had Aram leave this place with me even though she said that we should protect this place. I'm really sorry. Really...."

Jiyeon and Aram looked down and apologized. Daemyung stepped in.

"These girls didn't do anything wrong. It's my fault for leaving them open for ventilation. I shouldn't have left this place...."

Maru stared at the apologizing trio before sighing.

"The one that did this is not you guys so why are you the ones apologizing? And if there's a responsibility, it lies with all of the acting club, so you don't have to apologize to me either. Aram, Jiyeon, and Bangjoo, you three should go to your classes now. The next period will start soon."

The first years hesitated, but when Maru urged them on, they returned to their classes, albeit reluctantly.

"What are you going to do? This is a mess."

Dowook clicked his tongue and looked inside the container. It was definitely a mess. Since it was done with paint, paint thinner should be able to erase them, but it was unknown if the costumes with distinct color could be saved or not. The props were in a horrible state as well. The traditional paper lamp was clearly beyond salvageable, while things like wine glasses, small dolls and cigar pipes could be cleaned up. However, it was unknown how many of these they could salvage.

“The costumes are the problem.”

Maru scanned the container again with a bitter expression. For a work done in a short period of time, it was actually quite thorough. There weren't any empty paint cans on the floor.

“How long did you leave this place for?”

“Around 15 minutes?” Daemyung replied with uncertainty.

15 minutes. Since Aram and Jiyeon seemed to have visited this place during that time, it meant that this place was vacant for around 10 minutes.

“I guess it doesn't take that long to make it like this.”

“...Should we tell a teacher?” Daemyung asked carefully. His expression was filled with guilt.

“We should tell teacher Taesik, but it would do us no good even if we tell someone else. No, we can't tell them. This country is quite messed up. When something happens, the first to be interrogated is the one that saw losses through that incident, not the one that caused it. Once the teachers find out that the container has become like this, it's obvious that they'll scold us for not managing it properly and use it against us. I'm not really into that, so we should take care of this ourselves.”

“Sorry... just because of me.”

“I just said it's not because of you. The fucker that did this is the problem, not you. If it's considered fair for it to become like this just because the door was open, then why would thievery be a crime? Don't mind about that and let's think about how to solve this problem. For now, let's close the door since the ventilation holes are open.”

Nothing good would come out of everyone knowing what happened here. Just as Maru was about to close the door, the empty spray paint canister entered his eyes.

“Wait.”

He didn't have the time to have a close look at things, but now that he saw the spray paint can, he saw a green handprint. It was from the waterproof paint. Maru then glanced at the floor of the container. The culprit had splashed the costumes and the props on the wall and the paint had splashed back onto the ground. Maru lifted his feet up to check his own shoe. He saw waterproof paint on it. It was obvious. Although it was only a little, the paint that splattered on the ground got on his shoe.

“Daemyung. You went inside the container, right?”

“Yeah. I did.”

“Have a look at the sole of your shoes. Do you see any paint?”



“Huh, yeah, there is!”

Maru had a look at the work gloves next to the spray paint can. Green paint was everywhere on it. It seemed that the culprit first put the gloves on, and poured out the contents of the paint bucket inside the container. Then, he or she should have stepped backwards while pouring out the paint, noticing the costumes at the top. It should have been a little dangerous to try and paint those by pouring paint from the bucket. Then, finding the spray paint cans, the culprit should have returned to spray the upper walls with spray paint.

Maru first left and closed the door. Then he had a close look at the asphalt floor that led to the container. As he had expected, traces of green paint could be seen. They should belong to Daemyung, Maru himself, and the culprit.

“Let’s go back as well. The 5th period is starting soon.”

Maru took his two friends inside. There was less than 3 minutes until the next lesson.

“Just who in the world would do that kind of thing?”

“It shouldn’t be a prank. If that person went as far as to spray paint everywhere, then there must be a motive behind it.”

“...,” Daemyung silently stared at Maru. Maru smiled back.

“What, do you have someone in mind?” Dowook asked. Someone in mind? There was one likely culprit. Maru turned around right in front of his class and went to the design department class. As the 5th period was about to begin, everyone was in their classes. After having Dowook wait outside, he took Daemyung inside. He saw Geunseok near the window. Geunseok was calmly looking at them. Maru grabbed Daemyung who kept giving glances to Geunseok and walked towards Soyeon.

“How have you been?”

“What’s up, you two?” Soyeon chuckled. Although she left the acting club, she still hung out with the 2nd years from time to time. Though, with the start of May, it was hard to hang out with everyone since they started practicing.

“We had some business here.”

“Business?” Soyeon tilted her head. Maru smiled at Soyeon and naturally glanced at Geunseok. Geunseok was still looking at him with a relaxed expression.

“Nah. See you later.”

“What is it? What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you later. Don’t do anything dangerous with Taejoon, alright?”

They left the design class, leaving the grumpy Soyeon behind. At the same time, the bell rang. Returning to their own class, the three sat down.

“It’s not Geunseok? There’s no way he could act so calm after all we did to him,” Daemyung frowned as he spoke. Maru shook his head and replied.

“No, it’s the opposite. He’s practically telling us that he did it.”

“Why is that?”

“He’s good at acting. Even instructor Miso said that he’s the best when it comes to acting natural.”

“That she did.”

“That’s why he’s suspicious. He can’t be leisurely smiling at us like that. He has so much pent up against me, so he can’t smile back at me. Do you remember what happened when I went to the design class last time?”

“Oh, that time... Geunseok ended up crying in front of his classmates.”

“The guy whose arrogance pierces the sky looking at us with a smile after all the things he went through. He probably had his vengeance.”

“Did Geunseok really do it?”

“We’ll need to see for sure.”

“See what?”

“His shoes. He seems confident in not having it on any of his clothes, but let’s see if he took care of his shoes as well.”

“What if there’s nothing?”

“We can’t screw him with just circumstantial evidence.”

“S, screw?”

“It’s just an expression.”

Maru put his chin on his hands and tapped on the desk. Treating students like how students should be treated and treating adults like how adults should be treated. Treating people according to their social status was natural for not just Maru, but for all adults living in this era. A rule for superiors should be applied to superiors, and the rule for subordinates should be applied to subordinates. The amount of responsibility shouldered by people of different social status was of course different. A mistake from a director-level personnel and a mistake from a new employee. Those two were very different. In the same sense, the wrongdoings of a student who was still learning was different from a fully-grown adult with legal responsibilities. It wasn’t about the severity of the crime, but more about sympathy, or perhaps about whether there was room for forgiveness.

After all, it was written in the law.

The suspect is young and has no prior cases of committing a crime, so his sentence is reduced.

Geunseok was a horrible guy. However, treating him horribly just because of his nature was something embarrassing for an adult to do. Though, he had a high school student’s body, so they were both kids in a sense, but Maru’s inner nature was that of a ‘good old man’ who could treat some minor things as just a foolish mistake from youth.

However, for this incident, he crossed the line. In Maru's mind, Geunseok was on probation. He could have crushed him even harder that day, but the reason he didn't go all the way was because of his sense of guilt as an adult that could not guide the younger generation properly as well as his expectation that he would change his mind for the better.

Despite that, his expectations were betrayed nicely. It was quite painful. Perhaps others might call him childish. He had no confidence to say anything up front so he sprayed paint behind everyone's back. Yes, those were childish actions.

Childish actions from a child.

Maru stretched his arms out. Things would only even out if he showed what adults could do when they became childish, no?

"Let's get the soles of his shoes first. If there's nothing, we'll conclude by properly locking the container in the future...."

"And if we find something?"

"Then it's overtime."

At that moment, Dowook clenched his fist and spoke.

"I have confidence if it's about beating him up."

"We can't do that. Do you want to transfer schools with him?"

"Ah, right. What are you going to do then?"

"I'll be very childish. Like, very, very childish."

"Childish?"

Maru smiled. At that moment, the front door opened and the teacher entered.

"For now, look front. You guys need to attend your classes."

Dowook and Daemyung nodded and looked at the chalkboard. Maru fidgeted and fell into thought.

\* \* \*

Geunseok giggled after seeing that Maru and co. left without doing anything. He thought that they must have come here looking for trouble, but returned after seeing that he was acting so calm. He was in a hurry when he poured the paint, but he didn't hastily pour them out so that none of it got on his clothes. He didn't leave any evidence behind. Nonsensical stuff like fingerprint recognition would not be used. In the first place, they wouldn't call the police for something like that.

'And if it's that bastard, he won't tell the teachers either.'

There was no way Maru would blow this out of proportion since he was well aware of the circumstances that the acting club was in. As such, this incident would end very quietly. They must feel frustrated, but what could they do? There was no evidence.

Geunseok felt that class was very enjoyable for the rest of the day for some reason.

### Chapter 243

Daemyung was in thought throughout the entire class - Is Geunseok really the culprit? If so, what was the reason behind it? If it wasn't him, then who else could have done such a thing?

'But no matter how hard I think about it, I can't think of anyone else that might do that.'

He felt sorry the moment he suspected Geunseok, but no matter how hard he thought about it, he couldn't think of anyone other than Geunseok that might do such a thing. There were a lot of teachers that did not view the acting club in a good light, but there was no way those people would do such a thing while risking their jobs. This meant that the culprit had to be a student. If someone went as far as to endure the stench and the risk of putting paint on their clothes, it meant that that someone had animosity towards the acting club, and the only one Daemyung could think of that fit all the criteria was Geunseok.

'That's not right.'

In the school violence incident from a while back, not a small number of students were expelled or transferred away. He didn't know the exact circumstances, but he had the feeling that Maru was involved in it as well. Since he was seen conversing with a group of people that were bullied in their respective classes, he shouldn't be totally unrelated.

'Perhaps some of those that got punished back then were....'

Not all of them transferred schools or were expelled. Some of them received punishment to do work within the school. Some of those people may have heard about the person that got them into trouble. What if those people decided to take revenge on Maru?

Haaa, Daemyung sighed. Suspecting someone and coming up with countermeasures wasn't his thing. He wondered why such a thing happened.

'If I just had locked the door!'

A sense of guilt welled up inside him once again. Maru told him that he wasn't at fault, but when he thought about it, none of this would have happened if he had locked up properly.

'I should take responsibility, right?'

This happened just as they were about to start proper practice with all the props. He felt sorry for the first years that just got into acting. He ended up getting them involved in this bad incident. He was reminded of Jiyeon and Aram looking guilty and that made him feel even more sorry for them. They had done nothing wrong.

Ding dong, suddenly the bell signalling the end of the lesson rang out. Daemyung was surprised by it and raised his head. He saw that the teacher was leaving the classroom. 50 minutes had already passed.

He hurriedly turned around to look behind him. He saw Maru standing up without saying a word. He looked just as usual. It was as though he was just going to visit the bathroom.

“Maru, are you going?”

“I am. I’ll have to check the color at least. Whether it’s white, pink or green.”

Maru then walked out of the classroom with his hands inside his pockets. Dowook also stood up and followed him out. Daemyung felt like there would be a fight and followed the two out as well. Slowly walking towards the design department class, Maru entered the classroom without hesitation. Daemyung gulped and took a step inside as well. Although no one in the class seemed to care about him, he felt as though his face was being pricked.

Maru walked up towards Geunseok who was chatting with his classmates. Although he was just staring at him, the mood around him was serious. The design class classmates also took steps back and started scanning Maru from top to bottom.

“What is it?” Geunseok spoke first.

“Geunseok. Since lesson break is short, I’ll get straight to the point. The container, did you do it?”

Daemyung, who was looking at Maru from the back, widened his mouth in shock. He did not imagine that Maru would ask that so directly. He had thought that Maru would ask roundabout questions and eventually induce Geunseok to reveal his shoes or his slippers, but Maru ended up asking the question up front.

“What’s this bullshit about?”

“It’s not bullshit. We found our container in a mess, so I’m asking if you are the one that did it.”

“Damned fucker. Why are you asking me that?”

“You didn’t do it?”

“Fuck, are you kidding me?”

“Don’t get too excited, prick. I’m just asking, why are you so frightened? You’re making me suspect you.”

Daemyung saw that Geunseok’s expression was crumpling slightly when Maru said those words. Maru put his hands on Geunseok’s desk and leaned forward. Their heads were now only inches away from each other’s. At that moment, people around started whispering amongst themselves. Daemyung became very uneasy when he saw that some people with strong impressions were approaching the two. He felt that a fight would break out at any moment. He had seen others get into a fight once when he was in his first year, and it was a violent one where chairs were flung across the air and mop handles were broken to be used as rods. He had learned later that some of them had broken teeth while some had broken noses. It was that moment when he realized that he was in an engineering high school and that he had to stay obedient.

But right now, one of his closest friends was about to get into a fight. Daemyung felt his heart race as he looked around. He was planning to get rid of any dangerous objects first if things got out of hand.

Daemyung thought that Geunseok would try to punch Maru first. The atmosphere was that tense. However, Geunseok unexpectedly did not attack at all. No, in fact, he was even looking away from Maru’s eyes. He had a bigger build than Maru, so he shouldn’t lose out when it came to a fight.

Daemyung thought that perhaps Geunseok was frightened because he was laughing awkwardly and was fidgeting. Perhaps it was because of last time? Or perhaps he got into a fight with Maru even before that?

The atmosphere became tense. Daemyung felt as though his face was being ripped apart. He felt as though the students from the design department were surrounding them. No, it wasn't just his feelings. They were indeed gathering around them.

'Maru.'

Just what was he up to? At that moment, Maru smiled while looking at Geunseok straight in the face.

"You didn't do it?"

"Fuck, how many times do I have to tell you?"

"Then can I have a look? I'm a very doubtful guy, you know."

"Damn prick. What do you want to see, huh?"

"A few things."

"What if you don't find anything?"

"If I don't find anything, I will have to apologize, obviously. You did nothing wrong, right? Just consider me trash and bear with me for a while."

Those words were quite strange. Daemyung realized that Maru had Geunseok playing on top of his palms. Although it felt as though a fight was about to break out at any moment until just moments ago, and it still felt tense, Geunseok now had no choice but to abide to Maru's words now. If he denied Maru, then everyone would become suspicious of him.

Geunseok did not get flustered at all and took off his top.

"Here, have a look, fucker," Geunseok said as he threw it towards Maru. Daemyung felt that this was better instead. It would be easier to find something if Geunseok was compliant. Just as he thought of that, he felt something strange.

"Why are you giving me your clothes?"

Maru's words contained a prankful tone. At that moment, Daemyung realized what was going on and looked at Geunseok with widened eyes. Geunseok also had a face of having just committed a mistake. Though, he soon came back to normal before speaking,

"I thought you wanted it."

"Ah, yeah. I didn't know that you and I got along so well with each other. Did my telepathy telling you to give me your top get through to you?"

Daemyung saw that Geunseok's mouth was twitching. It was a clear sign of dissatisfaction, and on one hand, it seemed to be a sign of unease as well.

"Don't bullshit me. Just do what you came to do."

“I will.”

Maru didn't even give a glance at Geunseok's top and just folded it neatly before placing it on his desk. Geunseok frowned and looked at Maru.

“But I want to look at this place instead.”

Maru slowly sat down and grabbed Geunseok's slippers. It was at that moment that the calm-looking Geunseok was shocked out of his wits and moved his feet back. He gulped as though he realized that he had overreacted.

“What is it? It's not like you can't show me.”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“That's strange. Didn't we come to an agreement? That you'd show me? Or was it just me that came to that conclusion?”

Maru shrugged his shoulders. Daemyung was flabbergasted by Maru's actions. Now, he had the opponent playing on top of his palms. As he had been staying calm this whole time, there was no reason for Geunseok to get violent either. No, even before that, Geunseok didn't look like he wanted to get violent with Maru at all. Was he always so patient? No. Geunseok was the type of person that would easily get excited. The fact that he was just swearing meant that something had happened between him and Maru before.

“If there's nothing wrong with it, I'll kneel down and apologize to you as a service. It's hard to see things like that these days, you know?”

Maru grabbed Geunseok's slippers with a smile. Geunseok gnashed his teeth and took another step back. The expression he had at that moment was not a sense of loss but suspicion as well as a little bit of worry. Perhaps he had not checked the sole of his slippers. If Geunseok was really the culprit, he would have checked his clothes for paint.

That was the reason why he threw his top with so much confidence.

‘Ah.’

That was practically the proof that Geunseok was indeed the culprit. He showed Maru the ‘evidence’ because he was so confident, even though Maru hadn't said anything yet. That was why Maru focused more on his shoes. Perhaps....

Daemyung tensed his eyes. He saw. There was a slight green on the rims of Geunseok's left slipper. Maru should have seen it as well since he was close. That was probably why he went for the shoes first. Maru wasn't the type to make a move if he wasn't entirely certain, so he probably caught that way before Daemyung did.

Maru took the slippers off Geunseok's feet and checked the soles. Indeed, there was green paint on it. Although it was a small amount, it was discernible to the naked eye.

Maru wordlessly showed Geunseok his findings. Geunseok's expression did not change, but his clenched fist seemed to convey his feelings.

'He did it.'

All that was left was interrogation.

However, at that moment, Maru nodded his head once before taking his own slippers and giving them to Geunseok.

"You can use these. I'll take these for a while."

"Wh, why?"

"Because it's dirty. I'll give them back to you after I wash them. Very cleanly, that is."

"..."

Maru turned around. That was it. Daemyung had a bad taste in his mouth. They drove Geunseok into a corner, but now they were just leaving. At that moment, Geunseok stood up from his seat and spoke.

"That wasn't my doing. I don't know what you're on about but it wasn't me!"

"I know it wasn't you. So don't get excited. Did I say something?"

Maru signalled with his eyes to his two friends to go. Daemyung glanced at the puzzled design department students and followed Maru out.

"Is that it? I think that prick did it," Dowook said as he frowned. Maru did not say anything and just spun the slipper on his fingers. Daemyung turned around to glance at the design department. Geunseok was glaring at them. He looked as though he was about to charge at them at any moment and take back the slipper. However, he eventually smirked and returned to his class.

"Uhm, Maru. What are you going to do if he pretends that he didn't do it?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Huh?"

"I said it doesn't matter. I'm just going to make a report."

"A report... you say? To the teachers?"

"No."

Maru whistled as he sat down. Daemyung was unable to understand what Maru was thinking.

## **Chapter 244**

It didn't feel like the calm before the storm. Even after the 6th period, Maru did not show any movements. Daemyung was even a little confused when he saw Maru acting like everything was solved with him putting the slippers in his bag. Perhaps he was planning to forgive Geunseok after giving him a warning?

'I don't think that's what's happening though.'



With this incident, they were now unable to use the majority of costumes that their seniors had painstakingly created over the years. It was the same story with the props. Geunseok's actions were extremely serious to just let him off. After being thrown out of their clubroom, they had to throw away a bunch of props and costumes. Although it was a pity to throw any of them away, they had to be done with as their new space was smaller. The remaining props and costumes were naturally really precious as they survived the selection process.

"Uhm, Maru."

"Yeah?"

"You said something about making a report. Is that all you're going to do?"

"It is. What about it?"

"No, nothing."

That was a bit of a pity, but thinking about it, Geunseok was someone who had spent a year with the rest of the acting club. The reason they were able to have good results at the competition was also thanks to him. That was the undeniable truth. Perhaps Maru was about to let him off on a good note since he considered that point. It was just that, something still tugged on Daemyung's mind. Who was he going to make the report to? If it was not a teacher, then who else...

Daemyung watched as Maru walked out of the classroom with his phone in one hand and lied down on his desk face down. He didn't know the specifics, but it felt as though things were over. He was worried that a fight may break out when Maru went to the design department class, but it ended up like this.

'Yes. All's well that ends well.'

Daemyung closed his eyes. He was relieved that things ended quietly.

\* \* \*

Geunseok shook off his unease the moment the 8th period ended. He almost panicked when he found out that there was paint on his slippers, but now that he thought about it, it couldn't be considered decisive evidence. He could just say the paint got on there from somewhere else. It wasn't like there was a CCTV within the school, nor was there anyone that saw him. He could just act ignorant.

Of course, it would be a complicated matter if Maru decided to get the teachers involved, but Geunseok was well aware that Maru won't do such a thing so he wasn't worried about that. The acting club had desperately hidden the fire incident. Moreover, thanks to that incident, they were expelled out of their club room. Maru should be very well aware of how the teachers would view the acting club if he decided to tell them. This was why getting the teachers involved was out of Geunseok's consideration. If they do? Then he could just drag the fight out so that the teachers would eventually leave. After all, there was no evidence.

"Geunseok. I'm going to the PC bang(PC cafe), let's go together."

"Shall I?"

To maintain his connections with his friends, he had to participate in minor outings like these. If he rejected them too much, his reputation might dwindle. He took his bag and left. Although he had somewhat expected Maru to be waiting for him, there was no one on the corridor.

He saw the electric engineering department had just finished their homeroom and were leaving as well. He found Maru and co. among them. For a brief moment his eyes met Maru's. Geunseok intentionally made a smirk. He did so in order to see Maru's reaction. Maru just scanned him from top to bottom before wordlessly facing away.

At that moment, Geunseok inwardly rejoiced. He had to admit that Maru was a smart guy. He wasn't good at his studies, but even Geunseok wanted to learn a thing or two from him about how to handle other people. The fact that such a guy took a step back meant that he knew that the slipper was not a conclusive evidence. The fact that he came to visit Geunseok's class despite that was probably to tell him that he was aware of who the culprit was. It was just a simple threat, not something more, not something less. That was the only thing Maru could do.

Now that he knew what was going on, his worries melted away like snow. The only thing Maru could do was to perhaps try and get those tainted clothes cleaned.

Geunseok felt refreshed now that he had gotten his revenge. He thought that he made a splendid choice leaving the acting club and not being hung up on it. Acting, he still wanted to do it. However, he wasn't going to do it through the acting club in his high school. He now had acquired time from his father as long as he maintained his grades. His father told him that he would not interfere with what he wanted to do during that time. It was painful that Junmin had ended up abandoning him, but he thought that he still had the talent. As long as he maintained his good grades and kept on practicing his acting, he should be able to get into a good entertainment company soon enough. If everything went wrong, he could always ask for help from his brother. His brother would probably accept him if he acted nice towards him.

Geunseok clenched his fists. When he reminded himself of Junmin, he gnashed his teeth. That day, he heard the words "I don't think you're the one" from him. This signalled the end of his contract. The moment he heard those words, he was so frustrated and angry that he ended up crying. That embarrassment - it still made him frustrated to this day. He liked neither Han Maru nor Lee Junmin. He decided that he would make them regret what they did to him one day.

"Let's go."

Just as he went down the stairs after shaking off his worries, he saw a lady with a baseball cap and sunglasses on walking up the stairs. The curvatures of her body shown above her training outfit was tremendous. Even his friends next to him were wondering who she was. It was just as he passed by that person while wondering if she was the so-called daughter of the head director of the school. Geunseok was shocked to the point that he stopped breathing. The smile he saw with a glimpse at the side of her face. That erotic smile that he could never forget made him realize who the lady was. The woman climbed up the stairs without even greeting him. Geunseok told his friends to go ahead before following the lady up.

"Coach."

Geunseok stopped her on the stairs between the fourth and the fifth floor where no one else could be seen nearby. The woman that he gave up his pride for and contacted numerous times was right in front of him.

“Who?”

The woman with a faint smile on her face was none other than Suyeon. Geunseok almost became angry. She asked ‘who?’

“It’s Geunseok. Hong Geunseok.”

“And so?”

“What?”

“So what?”

“Coach!”

“Tell me. So what? You feel nice to meet me? Or what?”

“...Are you really going to be like this?”

What of all the lessons, and the erotic times?

“You didn’t answer any of my calls or messages.”

“Kid, you’re creeping me out. Were we something?”

“What are you....”

“You don’t have any relationship with Mr. Lee Junmin. The coach work is over with. Do I still have any relationship with you? I don’t think so.”

“You don’t feel anything when you look at me?”

“Of course not. You’re funny. Why do I need to mind you at all? Stop misunderstanding. I get that you want to get close to me. I can do so, if you want. But... I can’t play on the same level as a snotty-nosed brat, can I? Anyway, see you later. If you’ve become a man by then, I might hang out with you once.”

Suyeon smiled and waved her hand. She felt so distant. It was as though seeing her through a screen.

“Uhm!”

He called out as he followed her. There, he found out. Suyeon was greeting the acting club with a smile on her face. She was here as an instructor?

Geunseok glared at Suyeon for a while before turning around.

‘You can’t play on the same level as a snotty-nosed brat, huh? Good. I can just become successful then. Women are all the same. They will end up spreading their legs out to successful men.’

Geunseok also grasped what personality this woman named Suyeon had. To have her, he had to pay the price. Geunseok licked his lips as he went down the stairs. He didn't like that he had to do so, but it still motivated him.

He left through the left main door and was just changing his shoes. At that moment, his phone suddenly started ringing. He took out his phone from his pocket. The name written on it was very unexpected. Geunseok stared at that name for quite a while as the bell rang a few times. He chuckled. At the same time, he felt somewhat joyful.

"It's been a while. How's your heart holding up, weakass?"

He spoke as he received the call.

-Calling someone so hardworking a weakass huh? You're a bit rude.

"Damn madman. Rather than that. What's up? You don't usually call me at this time?"

-I'm in Suwon.

"What?"

-I said I'm in Suwon right now. Let's meet.

"Weren't you in Busan?"

-I came back.

"When?"

-It's been about a year, I guess.

"A year? And you're calling me now?"

-I was busy. I became successful in my own way too. I've got a company I belong to.

"Damn kid. You called me to boast, huh."

-You have a rough mouth as always.

"Likewise, you are overly cheerful as always."

-That's just how I am. Rather than that. Where are you right now? I'm in Suwon station.

"Wait there, I'll be right there."

Geunseok then hung up on the call and looked at his phone screen. He saw a name - Yoo Jiseok. It was the guy he considered as his only friend.

\* \* \*

"It's been a long time. Hasn't it?"

"Looks like you have a good life going for you looking at your face."

Jiseok smiled brightly towards Geunseok who he hadn't met for a long time.

In his middle school, he moved houses from Daejeon to Suwyon. As he frequently moved houses, he didn't feel anything about it. The only thing that changed was the pharmacy that he went to to get his medicine. At school, he was known as the quiet kid in class. Afraid of the words from his doctor saying that he should avoid intense exercise, he sat still during gym classes as well. He lived like that since he was in elementary school, and whenever he did so, the other kids were considerate of him, but from some time onwards, they became distant. He was aware that they weren't the bad ones. It was just that he found it a little pitiful. That was why he often fell into thought. He imagined a story where he became a man loved by all and never had to feel lonely ever again.

He believed that nothing would change when he transferred to the middle school in Suwon. As he had expected, he started his 'quiet kid' life again. The ones curious about the new student in class soon distanced away from him and all they did was greet him. It couldn't be helped. The words that he shouldn't do any intense exercises became his shackles which made him think that staying still was the best thing he could do, and he believed that there was no one would become friends with him since he didn't take any action at all.

However, just one person. There was just one person who kept talking to him and smiled with him. That was none other than Geunseok. Geunseok was someone who said that he would follow his brother's steps to become an actor. He was very popular in class as well. He was good at his studies, and was very athletic to boot. He could do anything. Jiseok was envious of that Geunseok. That was his ideal way of living.

However, not long later, he ended up discovering Geunseok's secret. His secret was that his kind side was but a pretense, and that Geunseok didn't view anyone else as his friends. After his secret was found out, Geunseok got angry. He scolded Jiseok that he was now in big trouble thanks to him. However, for some strange reason, Jiseok didn't hate that part of him. In fact, he was glad. It was at that moment that he realized that all people led difficult lives. That made him realize that he wasn't the only sick one.

After that Jiseok talked to Geunseok more and more. At first, Geunseok smiled back at him in response in front of everyone else and got angry when no one else was nearby. He liked that Geunseok was humane. That was enough. Like that, they hung out together for around two years.

Geunseok was a self-centered, condescending man who the world would hate if they found out his true nature, but to Jiseok, he was the first guy that he spoke about his problems to. Around that time, he became interested in acting thanks to Geunseok. He learned various things from Geunseok who was teaching himself about acting. Jiseok went his way to look for theater acts and raised his dream.

Geunseok was still the guy that had the mask of pretense in front of everyone else, but he had become a friend of Jiseok who was very down to Earth. The two only had each other as friends and they were close enough that they didn't need to say what they thought to get their point across.

"How's acting?"

"Acting? God dammit. It's fucked up. Thanks to one damned prick, it went all wrong."

"That's because you have a screwed up personality. I told you to live a good life."

"Fucker, where else can you find someone living a better life than me? Look at me. I'm kind to everyone. Although it's all fake, I keep being the kind man in front of everyone else. Isn't that a real side of me too then? People think I'm the good guy after all. If that's not real, then what is?"

"Fine, fine. Your shit philosophy still hasn't changed, huh."

"Hey, your mouth has gotten a little rough after spending some time in Busan, huh."

"I learned it all from you."

"Damned lunatic."

And then, there was a moment of silence. Jiseok looked at Geunseok in the face, then smiled. He thought that friends must be beings that they could look and smile at without reason. Geunseok also started laughing while using swear words.

As they were laughing on the stairs on the first floor of Suwon station, people started staring at them. Jiseok started laughing even more because he found the situation fun.

"Weakass, stop laughing."

"Why? It's fun."

"Damn weakass."

"I ain't no weakass though."

"Nope. Not with that heart."

"It's getting better you know? The doc says I'll be fine with just medication. I won't be needing any surgery or anything."

"Really? That's good. Guess that removes the weak and just leaves you an ass."

"That's right. I'm not a weakass anymore. I'm just an ass."

"Damn lunatic. I had my guesses since you took that corner seat in middle school. That that damn fucker has psychopathic tendencies but is holding it in."

"That's right. Thanks to you, I became a weird guy who goes around greeting everyone. Thanks, I mean, thanks a lot."

"If you're thankful then treat me something."

"Then let's get something to eat. Tell me about your story too - why you left the acting club, and what you're dissatisfied with. You know I'm good at listening."

"Though, you never give solutions."

Jiseok smiled and hung his arms around Geunseok.

"Geunseok. Do you still remember what you first said when you greeted me?"

"What did I say?"

“You said ‘Hello? Your name is Jiseok? My name has a ‘seok’ in it too. It’s nice to meet you.’ Do you remember that?” Saying that, Jiseok gave Geunseok a glance. Geunseok’s lips twitched as he replied,

“Weakass, I don’t remember. And I was that childish? We both have a ‘seok’ in our name? Stop kidding me.”

“I’m not kidding though.”

“That’s funny.”

Jiseok laughed his heart out as he walked. This was why friends were good. To Jiseok, Geunseok was like a hammer - the hammer that beat up this world that was boring; that he was afraid of; and that was stifling. Jiseok admired that boldness and that liberty. And now, he was proud because he felt that he had become somewhat similar. If there was one thing he wanted, then it was that he wanted to be of a good influence to him like he was to Jiseok himself. Jiseok thought that it would be good if he was the one to fix Geunseok’s twisted personality.

“Don’t laugh, prick. You’re making me embarrassed,” Geunseok spoke.

\* \* \*

Practice had ended and it was time to clean up. Maru took out his phone and stood up. There was an order to his reports. The effects would only be amplified if he maintained the command line. And since he had to be polite, he was going to get permission as well.

“You’re making a call again?”

Daemyung raised his head and spoke. Maru looked back at him with a smile, saying, “yes”.

## **Chapter 245**

Walking around with a script in one hand, Geunsoo suddenly turned his head towards the dining table. His phone was making a loud noise from the vibration. He picked up the phone from the glass top.

“Hello?”

-Senior, this is Han Maru.

“Oh, yeah. Maru.”

He put the script down and sat down on the sofa. He turned on the TV intending to rest a little. He saw celebrity actors laughing and enjoying themselves in a reality TV show.

“What did you call me for?”

-I have something to tell you.

“Something to tell me?” Hearing that, Geunsoo lowered the volume. Maru’s voice was usually calm, but today he sounded desolate. Geunsoo frowned slightly as he felt as though Maru was about to tell him some bad news.

“Tell me.”

-Someone poured paint on the costumes and props of the Blue Sky acting club. The culprit went out their way to spray everything with black spray paint as well. Thanks to that more than half, no, almost all the costumes are beyond saving.

“That’s not good news. Do you have to throw away the mourning clothing that was knee-length? Miso and I made that one you know.”

-If you’re fine with it being green, then sure.

“What about the lamp? Soojin painstakingly made that one.”

-The paper is all ripped.

“Miso will erupt into anger if she finds out. Ah, we spent quite a lot of time creating those, you know? Although it’s a decade-old memory now, it’s still vivid. Our first act was an old traditional play. Thanks to that, we went all the way to Dongdaemun to get the materials and we went through a lot to make a set of Hanbok. But in the end, we couldn’t make a Hanbok and had to settle with making a set of mourning clothes instead. We ended up borrowing the jeogori and the skirt.”

Although this event happened a long time ago, the event was so vivid in his memory that he still remembered it to this day. Their first challenge, their first ordeal, and their first success. It was from a time where everything felt new.

“I don’t think that’s good news at all.”

-What I told you is not good news at all, but it’s about to get worse.

“What is it?”

-The one that ruined the props is Geunseok.

Geunsoo sighed and laid back on the sofa. He did have his guesses from Maru’s intonation. After all, there was no actual reason for Maru to report to him about problems that occurred in Blue Sky. If there was one reason, then it had to be that it was related to his little brother.

“Senior Junmin told me about him a while back. That he’s a little lacking to keep him by his side. I thought that Geunseok had given up since he became quiet, but it seems that he’s been waiting this whole time. It’s really... haa.”

His little brother, Geunseok, was a polite kid. At least on the outside, it was hard to find any flaws on him. Even in elementary school, he did everything to perfection with a single compliment. He brought back great results, and their parents complimented him for those results. From some time onwards though, that made him look down on others. That was how his personality to look down on others and be obedient to his parents came to be. From the moment his brother smirked at him after receiving a bunch of Christmas presents from their parents, Geunsoo decided to leave his house. He talked a few times with his little brother to try and turn his head the other way, but he seemed to like his way of living. He left his house despite his father saying that he would disown him when he said that he would major in acting. The word his brother said to him that day as he left his house was ‘loser.’

A lot of things happened after that and when he took his mentally unstable little brother to Daehak-ro, he believed that his little brother had calmed down somewhat and was going to lead a stable life in the



future. However, he was wrong and his brother's roots hadn't changed. Well, if everyone changed their minds for the better with just one event, then injustice wouldn't exist in this world. Despite that, he believed that it was good progress that his little brother now had motivated himself to do things, but it seemed that acting was just the means, not the end. If he really liked acting, then there was no way he would go as far as to ruin all the costumes and props that he and his friends had painstakingly went lengths to create back then.

He had given up on a good brotherly relationship a long time ago, but still wanted to be closer to him than absolute strangers, but from the news he heard today, he ended up realizing that his brother took after his father too much.

It was even frightening how similar the two were.

"And what's the reason for your call?"

-First is to tell you that I am going to end this here because I think it will get even messier if I let him be; second is to apologize to you because the first reason might put your younger brother in a very uncomfortable situation; and the third and last reason is to get your father's number, senior.

"...I don't get what you're trying to do, but I do get that Geunseok is in for trouble."

-There will be no such thing as a 'good ending'. It's not my wish for him to start repenting after this incident. I just want things to stay quiet. I just don't want him to get on my bad side.

Geunsoo smiled bitterly after hearing Maru's words. He felt responsible. He felt responsible for leaving his brother until he ended up in that state. Although none of this was mentioned, Geunsoo realized that when Maru asked him for his own father's number, he was indirectly telling him to take part of the responsibility.

'Well. If I really wanted to take action for my brother, I should have done so while I was still under father's wing. Not just leave by myself.'

Geunsoo started speaking again,

"I'll send you the number by text."

-Yes.

"I'm sorry for being an irresponsible brother."

-That's what I'm trying to say. However... I'm not trying to blame you. It's the parents that are the mirrors of their children. Senior, no, hyung-nim, I believe that you're splendid in that regard. You've saved yourself. I'll hang up now. I guess the next time we meet will be at the shooting location.

"Probably not, we don't have any overlapping scenes. See you during the read-through. Though, that will be the only time."

-Yes. Then please rest.

Geunsoo hung up and raised the TV volume. He had run all the way here without looking back, but now that he thought about it he wondered whether he should have looked back sometimes. He closed his eyes with the TV still turned on. The laughter from the TV didn't seem as enjoyable anymore.

\* \* \*

Geunseok hung up on the call with a fearful gulp. He had gotten a call just after getting on the bus after separating from Jiseok. The call came from Junmin.

Junmin very calmly asked him whether he knew about what vandalism was. At that moment, he felt a shiver running behind his back. Junmin then continued to say that someone had vandalized a container that was under his name. Hearing his rebuking voice, Geunseok unintentionally ended up making excuses and apologized. Junmin was somewhere high above, on the same level as his father. He inwardly vowed to get vengeance, but he was well aware that he should not get on his wrong side right now.

Getting off the bus, Geunseok ended up kicking a trash bin out of anger. It was obvious who told him that. It could be none other than Han Maru. Geunseok left the place before other people stared at him. The putrid smell from his shoes made him become more angry.

When he arrived at his apartment complex, he widened his eyes after finding a black sedan. 2487. It was the number of his father's car. It was 9 in the evening right now. It was still early for his father to be home as he had heard that his father was going to play golf with his colleagues today.

He felt uneasy for some reason. He felt as though there was an ominous aura emanating from the black sedan. He felt paranoid. He consoled himself by thinking that it must be because of Junmin's call as he got on the elevator.

Along with a ding sound, the doors opened. His apartment was to the left. Geunseok carefully entered the passcode and opened the door. The first thing he saw was his father's golf shoes. It was tidied up neatly towards the door. Although it wasn't that different from usual, it looked quite scary today.

He took off his shoes and entered. His father couldn't be seen in the living room. He heaved a deep sigh of relief. He might have lost it if his father was calmly sitting down on the sofa. The fact that his father was in his room meant that it was okay.

He carefully walked towards the main bedroom and knocked. However, he didn't get a reply. He was confused since his father's golf shoes were still there.

"Excuse me, father," he called out to no avail. He wondered if his father was asleep. Now that his thoughts arrived there, he was even more relieved. Just as he was about to return to his room, he smelled something.

A faint smell tickled his nose. It was the smell of cigarettes. The moment he realized that, Geunseok felt a tingle running through his head, nay, his whole body. He felt very tense on every part of his body.

His father was a god in self management. As such, he did not smoke. Correction, he did, but that was only for cases when someone higher up than him offered him to. His smoking was for business. He faintly remembered his father saying how smoking and drinking was a form of sociability. At the same time, he heard the words that he would never smoke alone. He always said that smoking alone was just

throwing away lifespan. However, there was just one situation where his father would smoke. On those days, Geunseok never left his room. He just locked up his room and kept staring at the wall.

Geunseok grabbed his shaking legs and quietly looked towards the veranda. He saw an orange light flickering. The faint silhouette sucked on the cigarette before spitting some smoke out. Geunseok held his breath. He grabbed the door handle to his own room with shaky hands so as to not tick his father off. It was just as he was about to push the handle down to enter his room when his father called out.

“Hong Geunseok.”

“Y-yes.”

“You know, I had to bow down a lot when I first entered society. I bowed down again and again and I even had to kneel at times. When a partner company’s CEO told me to pour vodka in my shoes and drink from it, I complied. That was because I believed that being servile was a necessary step to become successful. Years later, I had that CEO kneel before me and drink vodka mixed with ash. When I told him that I’d extend the refund period a week for every glass he drank and he did so with joy.”

Geunseok looked down at the floor. He didn’t dare raise his head to look at his father. When he was young, he thought that his father was a gentle man. This was because he complimented him whenever he won prizes at his school. However, after tasting failure just once in middle school, he saw his father’s true face. From that moment onwards, his father became the supreme law that he did not dare disobey. His father became his dogma, in a sense.

“From that moment onwards, I never had to bow down to anyone. Especially not because of something I did. That is because I know how horrible the taste is to bow down to someone else.”

“....”

“But for the first time today, I had to utter the words ‘I’m sorry’ to someone else. It felt new. I don’t remember the last time I said such words. And that made me realize once again how horrible it feels to apologize.”

“F-father....”

“I provided you with a place to sleep, food to eat, and clothes to wear. I did my best for you to receive the best kind of education, and to provide you with the best kind of nutrition. I think I did my part. Don’t you think?”

“Y-yes. You’re entirely correct.”

“Then, my son. You should have acted so that I don’t have to apologize to someone else on your behalf. I thought I was raising a son, not a pig.”

“....”

“At least Geunsoo never tainted my reputation. Oh, he even rejected my help and struggled to live his own life. In that sense, I admit that he deserves some acknowledgement. It is only natural for my - Hong Janghae’s - son. But... Why weren’t you able to control your own emotions and end up doing something like that? And also! If you did so! Then you should have cleaned up after yourself properly! If you did it then you should have done so in a way that you wouldn’t get found out!”

Whomp - the sound of leather being ripped apart could be heard. Geunseok covered his ears and kneeled down. He couldn't bear to look at his father's golf club ripping apart the leather sofa.

"It looks like I raised you wrong. You need some education. To think that what came to be from my seed is a 'thing like this'. I cannot accept it."

His father slowly approached him. Geunseok flinched away after seeing the black socks approaching him. That reminded him. No, that moment from his middle school surfaced from the depths of his memory. In that scene, his thighs and calves were covered in bruises, and he was saying 'I'm sorry' without stopping.

"Please son, at least do as much as I fed you. Do not shame me. ACT BETTER SO THAT I DON'T HAVE TO MIND ABOUT A MERE THING LIKE YOU!"

Geunseok closed his eyes. His lips were subconsciously repeating the words 'I'm sorry.'

I will never do it again.

I will never do such a silly thing like that again.

I will do nothing but study.

I will... I will...

He felt his head go blank. Nothing mattered to him anymore. Only the huge thought that he could never cause trouble again filled his mind.

"This is all because I love you."

Geunseok clenched his teeth when he heard the loud whooshing sound coming towards him.

## **Chapter 246**

It was last night when the long text message arrived. After receiving the two text messages before he called Geunsoo, Maru called Soyeon and Suyeon first and then called Geunsoo without hesitation.

'What time is it now.'

The skies were still dark outside. The sun hadn't risen yet. He tossed and turned to grab his phone to check the time. It was 5:40 a.m. He ended up opening his eyes at a really awkward time. After tossing and turning for a little longer, he stood up.

The air in the kitchen was cold. When he had a closer look, he found out that the door to the veranda was slightly open. He sighed and walked towards the veranda. He saw that many people were busily moving around even at this time. Watching the cars leaving the parking lot, Maru thought that he wouldn't be able to fall back asleep anymore as he returned to his room.

He tidied his still warm bed and sat down on his chair. He started reading through the drama script and the movie script side by side when his phone entered his eyes. After looking at his phone with a complicated gaze, he opened his phone and opened his message inbox. There was a long message and a short message that followed. The first one was from Yurim's parents, and the second one was an apology message from Yurim herself.

He had heard from Soyeon that Yurim had gone to Jeju island to receive mental care. Soyeon frequently called Yurim's parents to ask about Yurim's status, and after she calmed down a lot, she said that she directly called Yurim, not through her parents. He had heard that she had recovered well enough to laugh together again, and the message came right as he heard about the news.

The message from Yurim's parents started and ended with apologies. There were mentions about thanking him for not making a big deal out of that fire incident. There was also the mention that the reason they hadn't contacted until now was because they felt sorry.

The text message also briefly mentioned why Yurim ended up causing that incident. He could understand the parents' feelings of not writing down the details since it was a sensitive topic about their child. What he got from it was that the cause of Yurim's actions came from Geunseok.

Yurim's parents had written that they were 'sorry for that child as well.' However, Maru thought to himself when he read those words: Was it really something to be sorry about? No one in the acting club denied that the two were going out. The one that looked after the agonizing Geunseok was Yurim, and the two started going out thanks to that. However, from the message from Yurim's parents, it seemed that Yurim was very obsessed with Geunseok. It should have been Geunseok that should have been possessive of Yurim when Maru thought about it, so it seemed that something happened between the two that he wasn't aware of.

At that moment, Soyeon had texted him as well. The text message contained violent emotions even though it was just written in plain words. Maru wondered what was going on and had called Soyeon. Soyeon had told him that she had also heard about what was going on through Yurim's parents, and then continued on to tell him about what kind of shameless actions Geunseok was taking in class. Geunseok and Yurim were closer than anyone within the acting club. However, recently, Geunseok went around telling his classmates that he had not dated Yurim at all, and that he was just worried about Yurim and was trying to help her. Soyeon told him that she had heard that story from a classmate of hers and that she felt bugs creeping up her body when she heard those words.

-Geunseok spoke as though Yurim was mentally ill from the very start. How can he do that? I just can't understand him. No, I don't even want to. Do you know how much Yurim liked Geunseok, and how much she cared for him? Yurim supported Geunseok even when she was in a difficult situation herself. Do you know how much she liked him despite that...?

To Maru, neither Yurim nor Geunseok left a good impression on him. No, to be exact, they were worse than strangers. He didn't care what kind of misfortunes the two came across. However, if he was asked who pissed him off more, he could say Hong Geunseok with confidence. He felt a little bit of pity towards Yurim, but to Geunseok? He felt nothing at all.

Negative on top of a negative. The more he dug out about him, the blacker he became. The primary reason for that should be his parents that let him be until he became that way, but when he looked at Geunsoo, he couldn't entirely fault the parents. The two were raised in the same environment, yet they showed extreme differences in personality.

If one hates rolling around in dirt, then it is only right and proper to escape the ditch. Let's say that it's impossible to escape the ditch. If that was all it was, Maru could pity that person.

However, if that person was satisfied with rolling in the dirt and wanted to drag others into the ditch, he couldn't pity that person even if he wanted to.

Maru was reminded of one thing when he had called Soyeon. The period the relationship between Geunseok and Yurim went wrong overlapped with the time when Yurim and Soyeon's friendship broke apart. Maru was well aware of what happened at that time. After all, that was when he met Junmin and was introduced to Ganghwan. In other words, it was the same period that Geunseok met Suyeon.

He did expect that there was something going on between Geunseok and Suyeon. After all there was no way Suyeon would leave Geunseok alone when she was aiming for the bigger brother, Geunsoo. Maru had called up Suyeon and asked what happened between her and Geunseok. Suyeon giggled so hard when she heard that question and replied to him that she played a prank on him. He had hit the bullseye.

He hung up when Suyeon was about to say "You should listen to a favor of mine since I answered your question." Suyeon's words made everything clear. Although it was just a deduction on his part, the story would be complete. Suyeon entered the good relationship that was Geunseok and Yurim, and that should have caused Geunseok to distance himself from Yurim. As Yurim was extremely reliant on Geunseok's existence, she wouldn't be able to accept the fact that Geunseok was getting distant from her. He knew how foolish it was to try and estimate what other people were thinking, but it felt like there was no more room for discussion here.

Then he arrived at the conclusion: Geunseok did not need his pity. At first, he was about to take care of just the container event by calling Junmin. However, he had changed his mind and called Geunseok's father. It seemed that Geunseok's father had heard about the general situation from Junmin and Maru could feel that his voice contained suppressed anger. Although it was just a single call, Maru realized that Geunseok took after his father a lot. Geunseok's father used evasive words to put the blame on Geunseok's innate nature rather than on his way of educating his son.

After finishing the call, the first thing he thought was that the ancestors were never wrong. You reap what you sow. A tiger father does not beget a dog son. He could practically picture the violent nature that lied behind the deep, calm voice. It was obvious what kind of man he was from Geunseok's reaction whenever he heard someone mentioning his father's name.

And since he had said that he had received direct damage from Geunseok to such a person, he could picture what happened to Geunseok as well. If he was young, he may have had a guilty conscience about what he did.

Because of me, he was harmed...

Because of me, things got out of hand...

Because of me...

However, now that he was painstakingly aware of the fact that he was nothing more than an ordinary man in this world, he may feel sorry for him, but he did not feel guilty.

It was simple: there is no such thing as a 'method that can satisfy everyone' in this world.

The last line of fairy tales always ended with 'And they lived happily ever after'. Behind that though was the death of the queen who died after dancing with burning shoes on. There was also the princess that became foam without being able to tell her feelings.

There is the pair of siblings that survived by grabbing the rope sent to them from the heavens for good people, and there is the tiger that fell to his death. A happy ending for everyone was just something too idealistic. With that being the case, what mattered was decision. Who is more important?

Putting down his phone, Maru stretched his arms out. Quite a lot of time had passed. It was about time to get washed. He closed the scripts and put them inside his bag before standing up.

\* \* \*

It felt like watching a man that didn't exist. It was weird when put in words, but that was the only way to put it. Even though he was right there, he felt like he didn't exist. Daemyung watched as Geunseok powerlessly walked towards his class while looking at the floor before quickly going to his own class.

"Geunseok is acting strange."

"Really now?"

Maru acted as though he knew something, but he did not explain in detail. All he knew was that Maru's 'report' had influenced Geunseok in some way. Daemyung sneaked out to the design department class before morning homeroom began. He stumbled upon Soyeon who had just arrived and greeted her. Soyeon hung her bag on her desk and then glared at Geunseok. Her eyes were so scary that it made Daemyung gulp. Daemyung stood in her way because he felt that a fight was about to break out. Though, that did not stop her from glaring at Geunseok.

"Uhm... did something happen?"

"Yes."

"Can I ask what it is?"

Hearing that question, Soyeon hesitated for a moment before shaking her head.

"Sorry, but this is a sensitive topic and I can't talk about it with you. Oh, I'm not saying that I can't trust you. I know that you're a good guy, but... you know what I'm talking about, right?"

"Y-yeah."

She only acted embarrassed in front of Taejoon, and she usually acted more down to earth. If she said that it was something serious, then it had to be. And Daemyung felt as though Maru knew what was going on as well. Geunseok's soullessness and Soyeon's wrath. He was unable to grasp what was going on.

At that moment, someone hung an arm around his neck. Daemyung looked at Maru who stood next to him and widened his eyes.

"Soyeon. I'm pretty sure that it's needless advice, but let me just say this. Don't talk about that matter if you can. Nothing good will come from doing it. Both for you and for her."

“I know. I’m not going to. But I can’t stand just letting that guy be.”

“Oh that. You don’t need to worry about that anymore.”

Maru released his arm and walked towards Geunseok. Daemyung thought that a fight would break out since what happened here last time didn’t end on a good note. Just as he was getting worried, something unbelievable occurred before his eyes. Geunseok did not react to Maru at all and kept staring at his desk. However, what surprised him the most came right after that.

When Maru took another step forward, Geunseok was scared out of wits and moved backwards. Thanks to that, Geunseok fell from his chair and rolled on the ground. When the other students in the class looked at him, he hurried back into his seat. The boldness and leisure from yesterday was all but gone. Only unease like that of a herbivore being chased by a predator filled the air around him.

Maru walked back towards the two, but his expression was very scary. It didn’t seem like he was angry because of Geunseok, though.

“So he’s an actual trash that crossed the line,” saying those words, Maru glanced at Geunseok before leaving the class. Daemyung also followed suit.

“What happened?”

“It’s solved for now. Though, it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

“Did something happen to Geunseok?”

“I have something in mind. But I don’t think that’s something I can do anything about. It seems like I’ll have to tell senior Geunsoo about it. I’ll tell him that it’s about time to fulfill his role as a brother.”

“His role as a brother?”

Daemyung tilted his head. Maru’s expression was bitter, Geunseok was scared out of his wits, and Soyeon was enraged. For everything to be ‘solved’, the results were quite strange.

“Is it really solved?” He asked Maru who just sat down on his seat. Maru raised his chin a little before saying,

“It’s a happy ending where no one gets to laugh. In any case, we came to a conclusion.”

\* \* \*

Jiseok finished his call with his company. The company had told him the news that he was cast for a drama. He was the son of a family that opposed the main character, and had very few appearances. Despite that, the drama was aired in a golden time slot. He felt thankful that he got to participate at all.

He first told his family about the news and then to his friends living in other areas. Jiseok also called Geunseok. This fellow told him that he had to give up on the acting club but did not give up on acting. He smiled subconsciously when he thought about how they could talk to each other like before and help each other out in a meaningful way.



The phone signaling noise ended and a voice could be heard over the phone. The moment he heard Geunseok's "hello", he subconsciously frowned. It wasn't the voice filled with confidence that he had heard yesterday.

"Hello? Are you really Hong Geunseok?"

-....

Then the call ended. Jiseok felt uneasy and made the call again. Geunseok did not pick up the call for a long time. Jiseok sent him a text message. It was clear that something had happened to him.

A Korean folk tale about the . I'm not going to translate an entire folk tale, so you should read from that link.

## **Chapter 247**

Jiseok, who was gazing out through the window within a large convenience store just outside of Suwon station abruptly stood up from his seat. He put down his still unfinished coffee cup and ran outside.

"Hong Geunseok."

Geunseok got off the bus with very slow steps and slowly turned around towards him. At that moment, Jiseok frowned. He felt that something changed about Geunseok. That strange feeling made Jiseok approach Geunseok faster. His head was filled with the thought to check up on him as soon as possible.

"Hey, why are you so stiff?"

Just like what happened the day before, Jiseok was about to tap Geunseok's shoulders. The normal reaction would be that Geunseok would swear back at him, but the reaction he showed was outside of Jiseok's imagination. Geunseok raised both of his hands to cover his face. His eyes were filled with fear.

Jiseok's hand stopped midair. Geunseok looked at the tip of Jiseok's hand with shaking eyes before putting down his arms. Those stiff actions made Jiseok speechless. He instinctively realized that just asking what was wrong would be too rude of him.

"...It's hot, but I guess you need something warm. Wait a minute."

Jiseok returned to the convenience store and bought a warm bottle of chocolate coffee. When he carefully handed it over to Geunseok, he grabbed the plastic bottle. Even Jiseok felt stifled by Geunseok's nervous actions. Just what happened during the past day?

"Let's walk a little."

Usually, it was Jiseok that listened to Geunseok whenever they talked. That was their normal conversation. However, Geunseok did not speak a word today. He only followed what Jiseok was doing. His shoulders were drooping towards the ground, his eyes were fixed on the floor, and whenever a car passed by while pressing its horn, he was scared like a guy who just witnessed a thunderbolt striking right in front of him. Due to that, the coffee inside the bottle spilled on his hands, but Geunseok kept staring at the car that passed by.

"Geunseok."

“Uh, oh. That’s hot.”

His reaction was clearly a bit late. Even though his hands had turned red, Geunseok didn’t seem to mind. It was as though he was caught up with something else and that an injury of this level was nothing compared to it.

They went around the red light district near Suwon station and went to the alleyway where they could see many pojang macha. Jiseok looked for the store that he and Geunseok frequented during middle school, but unfortunately, it was no longer there. Instead, they entered an orange-colored one with the banner that said ‘Udon’ on it. Geunseok had yet to say something proper from the moment they departed Suwon station to the moment they sat down inside the pojang macha and started ordering.

“Ma’am, please give us some good food.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll cook you up a good one. I give a lot of freebies to students so you should come by more often.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He replied with a smile out of habit, but his smile didn’t last long. Jiseok held out a pair of chopsticks towards Geunseok and asked.

“Did something happen?”

“...No. Nothing happened.”

“You were limping. Are you hurt anywhere?”

“A little.”

“Really now?” Jiseok nodded his head with a bitter smile. This silence, this emptiness that stemmed from Geunseok’s lie. The person that he could talk to without restraint had built a wall of lies around him once again. The fact that he said ‘nothing happened’ implied that he didn’t want anyone to know about it. It would have been better if he clearly told Jiseok that it was none of his business.

“Are you sure nothing happened?”

“I said nothing happened.”

The lady put down two bowls of udon in front of them. Jiseok gave the one with a bigger portion towards Geunseok. Geunseok quietly split the wooden disposable chopsticks and started eating it. Jiseok watched as Geunseok started eating when he discovered a hint of blue on Geunseok’s skin. There were clear bruises on Geunseok’s left shoulder which he could see under Geunseok’s clothes. Seeing the serious wound, Jiseok almost unintentionally tried to touch Geunseok’s shoulder.

At that moment, Geunseok fell backwards with a loud crash. His feet were caught up in the legs of the table, shaking the table in the process which ended up tipping the udon bowl over. The hot soup and noodles hit the ground.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I tripped.”

“Oh, you should’ve been careful. Did you not get hurt?”

“We’re fine. I’ll clean up here. Please give me a mop.”

“Leave it. I’ll do it later.”

Jiseok apologized to the lady who seemed cool about the incident. In that short moment, Geunseok stood up without a change in his expression and left the pojang macha. Jiseok paid the lady before following Geunseok. Geunseok suddenly swayed around as though he was about to fall over. Jiseok tried to get to him and tried to support him up, but Geunseok rejected him.

“Forget it. I’ll do it. I have to be the one to do it.”

It was as though he was saying that he could not accept help.

Geunseok was not telling Jiseok anything. Despite that though, Jiseok smiled and walked by his side. Although their relationship started off on lies, Geunseok was the only one that stuck with him until the end. He did not know what was going on, but he wanted to console him. It was disappointing to him that Geunseok was using lies to avoid this moment, but Jiseok believed that their relationship would soon recover.

Jiseok thought that he should wait until his friend opened up his heart again. Just as they were walking, his phone started ringing. He took out his phone from his pocket and answered the call.

“Hello? Oh, Maru.”

Maru had called him for the read-through on Saturday. It was the day when all the actors, the director, and the author gathered to do a read-through in front of the press. After that event, the shooting would begin the week after. From what he heard, it seemed that they were going to finish the shoot by August and start editing from then.

“Yoojin wanted us three to go there together? I’m good with that. Okay, alright. But Maru, I feel good to have you call me first. You should call me more frequently.”

His new friend was someone with a stiff expression. This guy was an amazing one whose tone didn’t change even when facing famous superstars. However, from his experience, Jiseok was aware that he wasn’t a cold person on the inside.

He just took another step forward while thinking about this new event that would occur next week. He saw that Geunseok, who was walking by his side, had suddenly stopped. Geunseok’s eyes were still fixated on the floor. Jiseok followed his gaze to see if he had dropped anything on the floor, but nothing entered his eyes.

“What is it?”

“You... you know, Han Maru?”

“Oh! You know Maru as well? Well, I guess that isn’t a surprise. Maru told me he’s in the acting club so you might have met each other in a competition or something. Oh yeah, Maru apparently goes to a high school in Suwon as well. Don’t tell me that you actually go to the same school? No wait, it would be awesome if you actually do.”

Jiseok felt happy now that they got a common topic of conversation. Jiseok approached Geunseok with a smile. He was expecting that they could have a good conversation about Maru.

“Son of a bitch.”

He stopped mid-step. Jiseok had no choice but to stop in his steps. Geunseok had raised his head and was glaring at him with very unfamiliar emotions. The gaze made him shiver. The street lamp located above Geunseok’s head suddenly switched on. That streetlight replaced the sunlight of the setting sun and lengthened out Geunseok’s shadow. Jiseok couldn’t feel more uneasy looking at that shadow. It was as though the shadow was about to rise and attack him at any moment. This was the first time Jiseok felt that a person could become so hostile.

“Hong Geunseok.”

“Son of a bitch, get out of my sight.”

“Hey, Hong Geunseok.”

He frowned and called out to Geunseok, but Geunseok just walked right past him. He didn’t know what was going on. With a complicated mind, he followed Geunseok. At that moment, Geunseok suddenly swung his arms violently. Jiseok was unable to dodge that arm.

With a loud punching sound, he felt a dizzying shock from his cheekbones. For a brief moment, his vision darkened. Feeling dizzy, he kneeled down and grabbed the ground.

“...Geunseok,” he called out to no avail. Geunseok was walking away without the slightest bit of hesitation. When the pain had subsided a little, Geunseok had long since disappeared. Jiseok looked up at the darkened skies.

After a long time, he took out his phone, his fingers were heading for the call button.

\* \* \*

“What brings you all the way here?” Maru asked as he took off his hood. Jiseok had called him and asked where he lived all of a sudden. Maru had told him the bus stop near his home and got a reply that Jiseok would soon be here. Although Maru tried to get him to talk over the phone, Jiseok kept saying that they needed to talk in person. Maru felt confused since Jiseok’s voice had changed in such a short period of time and came out to meet him.

“I came to see a friend, and I suddenly had a reason to see you.”

Jiseok’s smile within the darkness felt as though it was about to snap off at any moment. Maru led him to a playground right behind the bus stop. They sat down on the bench as the creak of the empty swing could be heard.

“What is it?”

He thought that maybe some beer was suited to this situation. At that moment, an unexpected name came out of Jiseok’s mouth.

“Do you know Geunseok?”

Maru shut his mouth and stared at Jiseok. He had a complicated expression. This guy came looking for answers. Maru replied that he knew.

“Can I ask what happened?”

“Before that, the friend you were talking about before, is that Hong Geunseok?”

“That’s right.”

“Your friend in Suwon that you told me last time was him?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you two close?”

“Very.”

Maru felt a bitter taste in his mouth. Yes, trash had their own friends. Wasn’t that obvious? Even a cruel criminal might be a warm member of someone’s family.

The fact that he came all the way here at this hour meant that the two were pretty close. Maru organized his thoughts for a minute before speaking. He calmly told Jiseok the whole story without any exaggeration.

After listening to the whole story, Jiseok was unable to say anything. He just tapped on his knees with his fingers and just kept looking ahead of him. The number of people around them dwindled as time went by, and it was about time for the stationery store to close. As the moths made ticking noises and fell down from the street light, Jiseok started speaking again.

“He’s a... a bad guy, if what you say is true. He wasn’t that bad during middle school. In fact, everyone remembers him as the polite and good kid in class. However, I found out. I found out that wasn’t the real him. Geunseok is, yes, someone who lives on his ego. However, it wasn’t to the point where he harmed others for it. He was just... a dishonest kid.”

Jiseok clenched and relaxed his fist several times. The bitterness in his mouth could be felt over his voice. Maru was able to know that Jiseok treated Geunseok as a precious friend.

“In my head, I know that you did the right thing. But... it still hurts a little. Couldn’t you have solved it in another way?”

“I could get him to talk to me, try to persuade him, and do other things like that until he changes his mind. However, that takes a long time. Moreover, I had no reason to be so considerate of him. There is a short and clear cut path, so there’s no need for me to go that far. Though, it does leave a bad aftertaste in my mouth.”

“Looks like I was wrong about you. I thought you wouldn’t be so cold hearted.”

“Isn’t it funny that you’re trying to understand me after just two or three meetings? I don’t know what kind of a person I am inside your mind, but you’re probably wrong about me for most of the things that you think I am. Even I... took an extremely long time to find out who I am.”

“Yes. Now that you tell me, you’re right. You’re really good with your words. I can feel that every time I talk with you. You have a depth that I don’t possess. But precisely because of that... I find it a pity.”

Jiseok smiled pitifully. Maru understood where Jiseok was coming from since Jiseok must have seen that Geunseok was standing on the top of a cliff.

“Han Maru. You’re a good friend.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“No, you’re a good friend, and you’re a good kid. I felt this from the beginning. I realized that I wasn’t wrong while taking the audition together, and it was at that moment that I thought. I thought that it would be really fun to do acting with this guy; that we could climb to the top together if we did our best. But now, I changed my mind. I’m going to do better than you. I don’t want to climb to the top with you. I’m going to be ahead of you.”

Jiseok stood up from the bench as he continued,

“This is a small revenge on my part. Geunseok, a friend of mine, hates you. That’s why I must do at least this much for him. But you’re a good friend of mine as well. So please understand me.”

“Do whatever you want.”

“I’m going then. Sorry for calling you out so late.”

Jiseok smiled brightly at the last bit. Maru decided to talk about something unnecessary when he saw that smile.

“If it’s about Geunseok, you don’t need to be so worried. I told the most trustworthy person for the job. He’ll probably do just fine.”

“Really? That’s fortunate. I knew it... you aren’t that cold hearted. You’re a little cold, though. I’ll treat you to some hot chocolate some time. Perhaps that will make you become a little warmer.”

“Hey, you’re really something to say those cheeky lines without a second thought.”

“You think so?”

Jiseok walked away while waving his hand. Maru watched as he left and eventually waved back at him.

## **Chapter 248**

“You’re shooting a movie?”

“Yes, father.”

“Like, a proper movie, not something with your friends from school?”

“Yes.”

“Hah.”

During breakfast, Maru told his family about his cast in the movie. His father, who was slowly scooping up his bowl of rice looked at him with surprise while his mother, who was scooping up the soup, made an expression of confusion.

“We’re going to read through the script this Saturday, and the filming begins next week. Thanks to that, I might come home late, or even stay the night out. It’s just one scene, so you don’t need to worry about it so much. Oh, the location is in Sokcho.”

His father put down his spoon and asked.

“When was this decided?”

“It’s only been a few days. I took the audition recently.”

“...You’ve grown my son. You’re already starting to take care of yourself.”

His father did not ask many things. He just encouraged Maru to do his best since he started it. With that, Maru was over a hurdle. However, there was still a lot to go.

As a happily married couple, his mother kissed his father goodbye as he went to work and turned around. At that moment, Maru had to smile nervously.

The fathers of South Korea really didn’t express their emotions much. They never asked honest questions to their children despite their curiosities. After all, the ‘image’ of a father was the one where they watched everyone’s back. Maru’s father was someone who also maintained that image. That could be seen from just how he didn’t ask many questions. Meanwhile, his mother also maintained the stereotypical ‘mother’ image in South Korea.

“Why did you not tell me about such an important matter until now!”

As he had expected, his father wasn’t even a proper hurdle. To calm down his mother, who had an intense glint in her eyes, Maru first led her to the dining table. It was his strategy to use his mother’s principles to ‘be quiet during a meal’ against her. When he had his mother sit down, he first gave her a cup of cold water.

“Mom. It’s nothing to be so surprised about. I’m just an extra. There are no problems, and there’s nothing dangerous either.”

“Do you think that’s what I’m worried about? You should have told us if you were involved in such an important matter! Maru, I know that you’ve matured. However, you’re still a high school student. You’re still too young to take care of all that by yourself.”

“Okay. I’ll report everything to you starting next time.”

He might as well be disowned if his mother found out that there was 300 million won in his account. They settled with giving a call before going to the filming location and sending a text message every hour, but his mother still looked worried. Well, it wasn’t a surprise. There weren’t that many people who were capable of saying “is that so?” when their child suddenly talked about shooting a proper commercial movie.

Maru also planned to tell his family up front, but decided otherwise because he felt that his family might oppose him. As such, he told them after the fact. He didn't want to be a disrespectful child to his parents, but he also did not want to give up on the things he wanted to do because of family opposition. Since his mother took a step back as well, there were no more problems now.

Breakfast began again and only the sound of chopsticks hitting the ceramic bowls could be heard. From how his usually chatty mother stayed quiet the entire time, it seemed that her worries hadn't been entirely lifted. Maru wondered what he could do to console her as he picked up a soybean side dish. His mother had finished her meal first and asked after going to the kitchen sink.

"So... how much are they paying you?"

Maru smiled and lifted his head. His mother was hinting with her eyes not to lie. She was very strict when it came to things like this.

"A hundred thousand won."

"So much? I thought it was just one day."

"Yeah."

"Do famous actors appear on it?"

"Yeah."

"Sheesh... anyway, don't make your mother worried, okay? You should say no if they ask you to do something strange. I heard on the news that people are scamming others out of money by enticing them to become celebrities. You should be careful as well."

"Okay. I'll be careful."

Maru nodded his head.

\* \* \*

It was nearing the end of May. Thanks to the early heat from the summer, the school permitted air conditioners to be turned on during the day. However, it was only 'permitted'. The air conditioner didn't actually run. The only things that were working hard were the electric fans.

One noisy student asked the teacher if they could turn on the air conditioner, but the teacher didn't even pretend to have heard it. Right behind the notice about the permission to turn on air conditioning was probably an even more important one that said that the electrical bills had to be reduced.

"I want to go home quickly," Dojin spoke in a dragged out voice in a dragged out state as though he was a dried squid.

"Don't you have to help out at Iseul's restaurant?"

"...That is my home."

"...I guess it isn't easy being the son-in-law that lives with the wife's family."

Maru patted Dojin's back.



“Iseul’s mother told me not to get a job after graduation and continue the store instead.”

“That’s good. You already have a job in this high unemployment rate era. Congratulations.”

“Is this something to be congratulated about?”

“Don’t get distracted. That kind of life isn’t entirely bad.”

Dojin made a powerless smile.

Their homeroom teacher entered with sleepy eyes. He just ended homeroom with a ‘do a thorough job on cleaning’ before leaving. The students rejoiced and got ready to leave.

“Maru, let’s go,” Daemyung and Dowook spoke as they got their bags. From today onwards, the acting club would get busy. They had to remake the props and the costumes from scratch.

“How do we go about making the scene?”

“It’s a holding cell so don’t we need to put up metal bars?”

“And where do we get that?”

“We can nick a few from a construction site.”

“That’s a bit...”

That was the conversation between Daemyung and Dowook as they walked up front. Thanks to the participation of Dowook who was unexpectedly good with his hands, it seemed that the props could be made quite easily. Well, it wasn’t actually that surprising since his sister was good at crafting things as well. This was why genes were scary. Maru thought about getting him to make some theatrical masks later when he then came to the conclusion that it might actually not be the genes.

When they arrived on the fifth floor, the first years greeted them. It seemed that they were doing a read-through as there was a script in each of their hands.

“Let’s do some stretching before the instructor arrives,” Daemyung spoke as he stood in front of everyone. Ever since he took the role of the club president, he became more and more like a leader. As he wasn’t the type to order people around but the type to lead everyone by taking action himself, so none of the first years had a complaint about him. If he was someone that just told his juniors what to do, then they would have followed, but would not have liked him at all. He was the ideal type of leader.

Maru thought that it was good to have yielded him the role. He followed Daemyung’s actions by twisting his waist to stretch his body. Next came the facial muscles. This was where one used all the muscles in the face to create a variety of expressions. This was a crucial step to increase the variety of expressions one could make.

“Don’t look at me.”

Maru chuckled when he heard those words from Dowook who said the words with a scary smile. A perfectly symmetrical smile that showed the upper teeth was difficult to make. Just lifting the corner of the lips didn’t make a smile. It was only a smile after an innumerable number of practices in front of the

mirror to relax the tense muscles around the lips. A stewardess' smile was not something created in just one day.

Maru also stood in front of the mirror and did some facial expression acting. In a play, facial expressions actually weren't that important. Although it was important in small scale theaters since the audience is right in front of the stage, there was quite a distance between the actors and the audience in large scale theaters so the actors' facial expressions couldn't easily be seen by the audience. All actors were aware of this fact. This was the reason they exaggerated their actions on the stage. Expressions were the same. Small movements of the facial features meant nothing to a faraway audience.

This was why seemingly exaggerated emotions didn't look that out of place on a stage. Maru frowned in front of the mirror before widening both his mouth and his eyes to express glee. As different expressions used different facial muscles, he had to practice as many expressions as possible to develop his facial muscles.

"Seonbae. I can practically hear your mouth ripping," Aram called out from behind. When he slightly turned his head, he saw Bangjoo, Aram and Jiyeon standing behind the mirror.

"You should do it as well. You should practice early to not make any mistakes on the real deal."

"Like this?" Aram frowned as she spoke. It wasn't that easy for a girl to make an expression like she was doing now. Jiyeon hesitated for a moment out of embarrassment, but eventually started doing what Aram was doing. If Aram was a fully-fledged criminal that could rob a bank at any moment, Jiyeon looked like a stereotypical girl trying to act cute in front of her boyfriend. Bangjoo seemed to have taken after his sister and his eyes were different from the rest.

"Bangjoo, you practice with these two. They're both quite spectacular, in a bad way."

"Yes!"

When they finished their vocal exercises as well, Suyeon entered through the door. She took off the sunglasses she always wore before sitting down.

"It's so hot. I'm not getting any motivation to teach you guys."

Leaving Suyeon, who was grumbling like a child, aside, the club members started thinking about the props. They were used to Suyeon now. They were all aware that Suyeon would soon return to her normal self and start teaching them.

"Having something like a pistol should be good right?"

"There are toy guns for that. I believe there are holsters for them as well."

"Then let's use that. What do we need to do about the hostess?"

Daemyung looked at Jiyeon with a complicated expression. Maru was worried about that as well. Being a hostess meant that she had to wear a sexy outfit and wear thick makeup, but he wondered if Jiyeon was capable of digesting all that. A hostess didn't suit this girl with a squirrel face at all. Someone working in the adult entertainment industry had to have a seductive gaze, but Jiyeon was too naive for that.

While Jiyeon smiled back at everyone, Suyeon, who was far away, walked up behind Jiyeon and hugged her.

“Don’t worry. This big sister will tell you all sorts of things.”

“Wh, what?”

“Just trust me.”

Suyeon winked. It seemed that she had dealt with the heat. She was someone who was serious about her job so Maru thought that he should just leave Jiyeon up to her. After all, it was easier for a woman to tell her about these kinds of things.

“A scammer needs a suit, right?” Aram asked while locking her fingers together. She looked full of expectation.

“I’m going to wear a mini skirt, a white blouse and heels!”

“Do you have a place you can get them from?” Daemyung asked. Aram confidently replied ‘no’. She was clearly implying that the club should prepare the clothing. Daemyung looked at Maru since he was at a loss on what to do.

“Instructor, do you have a suit?” Maru asked Suyeon. Suyeon made a circle with her thumb and her index fingers.

“Aram has a similar body figure to mine, so it should fit if I tighten the waist a little more with a band.”

“Instructor, do you have high heels as well? I’ve always wanted to wear them.”

“I do. Since it’s like this, let’s go to my house. You too, Jiyeon. We should get you a set of clothes that suit you from my dress room.”

Suyeon looked like she was having fun. Perhaps she was thinking of it like dressing up dolls. Well, Maru didn’t mind as long as she did her job properly, but he did think that Jiyeon was a little pitiful when he thought about the things she was about to go through. He thought that he should tell Aram to take care of Jiyeon later.

“We got the scammer and the hostess down. We have a police uniform, as well as a delinquent uniform. So there’s only the drunkard and me left?”

Maru looked at the checklist as he spoke. Thanks to Daemyung bringing the clothes upstairs, they did not worry about having to prepare a new uniform. As for a drunkard, just casual clothes were fine. A white shirt and black suit pants. As for the tie, he could just use the one she gifted him. He smiled when he thought about having to wear a suit again after all this time.

“Now we need to create the scene. It would be strange to use rebar, right?”

“They’re too thin, so the audience won’t even be able to see it. And considering the sheer weight and that we have to move them on the stage... Getting some bamboo or wood and spray painting them should be our best option.”

“That sounds good,” Daemyung nodded and started writing down a list of props. Only when this list was finished could they go buy things without wasting time.

“Bamboo sounds good. Where do we get them?” At Daemyung’s question, Dowook replied that they should get them from the nearby apartment complex since they were used for landscaping. Daemyung shook his head.

“We should look into wood workshops or landscaping specialists. Let’s try asking Mintae-hyung. He’s a stage director so he should know a few places.”

“Oh, yeah, we can do that.”

Things were taking shape. What remained was preparing the small props

‘The acting club is going well without a hitch, and there are no problems on the movie side, so I guess everything’s good?’

It would have been better if all the minor problems were fixed as well. Maru took out his phone. His phone was on silent and it hadn’t gotten any messages. Perhaps nothing had happened yet?

Well, Geunsoo was someone trustworthy, so he could be counted on. Since he told Geunsoo about the matter, it was up to him to decide what to do. After all, there was nothing more tiring than getting involved with the matters of someone else’s family.

“Maru, about this...,” Daemyung spoke as he pointed at the list he made with a pen. Maru stopped thinking about Geunsoo and focused on the matter at hand.

## **Chapter 249**

He thought that he would never have to come back here again. After all, he considered that he had finished his job here by telling his father of his success that day. In one sense, it was a proof, one that he was right and that his father was wrong. Geunsoo was able to smile back at his father when his father saw him off with a smile. If it was before he had matured, his father’s smile might have churned his innards. He might have shouted at his father to admit that he was wrong. However, ever since he had experienced what society was like, he realized that becoming angry was supposed to be reserved for something precious, and judged that becoming angry at his father was just a waste of time since the relationship between the two was pretty much meaningless. That was why he gave back to his father the cheapest smile he could make. Seeing his father’s smile become stiff, Geunsoo felt that everything was over.

‘And yet here I am.’

He pressed the passcode into the door lock. The passcode hadn’t changed. His father’s meaningless obstinacy could be felt here as well. He was probably waiting for his son that he believed one day would lower his head to him and come back.

He opened the door. The first things he saw were a pair of trainers tidied up neatly, and the second one he saw was Geunsoo who hurriedly exited his room. Geunsoo, who clearly seemed nervous, looked at him with a dazed expression for a while. Geunsoo waved at him first.

“Long time no see.”

“...Why are you...”

“I think you know the reason better than I do.”

Geunsoo took off his shoes and entered. He pushed aside Geunseok who attempted to block his entry and opened the main bedroom. He could only see the neatly tidied bed.

“What about father?”

“He’s not here yet. Rather than that, what are you doing here?”

“Isn’t it about time he comes back?”

Seeing Geunseok so restless, Geunsoo smiled bitterly on the inside. This was the first time he saw Geunseok so restless since middle school. At that time, he took Geunseok to Daehak-ro while holding his hands.

“Fuck off from this place.”

That shout didn’t contain any tyranny but just desperation and unease. Geunseok kept looking at the door with shaking eyes. It was as though he felt that the world would end once the door opened.

Geunsoo opened the refrigerator to take out some cold water. Meanwhile, Geunseok walked towards the veranda with uneasy steps. He was tiptoeing to look outside. He was probably looking for their father’s car.

“Hey, are you crazy? What are you going to do if father comes home?”

“Don’t get excited and drink some water. You look pale.”

Although Geunsoo offered Geunseok a cup of water, Geunseok did not accept. In fact, he swung his arms and hit it away. The cup left Geunsoo’s hand, hitting the refrigerator before shattering into pieces. Geunseok, who was panting in anger, became shocked when he found the shattered glass pieces and water all over the ground.

“I, I need to clean it before father comes home.”

Geunsoo stopped Geunseok who was about to pick those shards with his bare hands. Just what made him like this? Geunsoo felt as though Geunseok was really standing on the edge of a cliff. He was practically struggling to come back to life.

“Hong Geunseok.”

“What!”

“Are you still going to keep living in this house?”

Hearing those words, Geunseok flinched. He raised his fear-stricken eyes to look at him for a while before shaking his hands off him and started picking the shards up again.

“Get out. Don’t get your hands cut.”

Geunsoo brought a dishcloth and gathered the shards up before dumping them into the trash can.

“If you’re here to bully me then just go. I’m miserable as it is.”

Geunsoo then asked his brother while looking at him in the face.

“Did you get beaten by father?”

When Geunsoo himself told his father that he would continue the acting club, he received a slap on his face. When his face was turned against his will, he felt a sense of defiance welling up inside him, and revealed those feelings to his father without restraint. After that, there was no violence. Rebukes and reprimands became harsher, but there was no physical beating.

“....”

Geunsoo started taking steps backwards with a fearful expression. This was a reaction he saw frequently since young. This impolite brother had splendid judgement in situations that were under his control, but the moment anything escaped his plans, his thought process just stopped. Usually, people at least try to take action in situations that were beyond their control with tenacity and get through the matter, but Geunsoo had nothing like that. The moment he encountered a barrier, he would go into a groggy state. It was as though he was a car engine. An engine was perfectly capable of handling what was within its RPM limits, but the moment that limit was breached, it would immediately start failing.

Geunsoo realized that his brother’s reaction was not normal. This wasn’t at a level he would be from just a few rebuking remarks. He was stricken with fear. He scanned Geunsoo from top to bottom. He was wearing a long sleeved shirt and full-length pants. As Geunsoo was sensitive to heat since young, he would wear short sleeved shirts and shorts starting May. The fact that he was wearing long sleeved clothing meant that...

“Why are you wearing long sleeves?”

“....”

“Is it bad to the point that you can’t tell me?”

“Please, just don’t ask anything and just fuck off!”

Geunsoo ran away to a corner and screamed. To Geunsoo’s ears though, it sounded like a desperate plea for life.

Geunsoo’s expression stiffened as he approached Geunsoo and grabbed his arm. Both he and his younger brother were around 180cm tall. Although Geunsoo’s physical stature was larger, Geunsoo won in terms of pure strength. Taking down his struggling brother, Geunsoo rolled up his younger brother’s sleeves. Although the forearm didn’t have any wounds, he could see blue bruises on his upper arm.

Geunsoo frowned. Even if his father decided to have the kid lie down and stomped on him, this kind of injury wouldn’t be here. Moreover, there were also long bruises as though he was hit by something thin. At that moment, Geunsoo’s eyes caught a golf bag right next to the air conditioner.

“Did you get hit by that?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Geunseok was about to cry. Geunsoo then had a look at Geunseok's back. He could see bruises underneath his clothes. The moment he saw those blue and black wounds, he felt his mind go cold.

"He actually went all the way."

This went beyond discipline. Geunsoo considered his father to be capable of restraint despite being authoritarian, but it seemed that he was mistaken. Geunseok swore at him and tidied his clothes. He could practically see the strands of rage emanating from his brother.

"Don't put your nose in my business and just fuck off!"

His younger brother really wasn't cute. However, he couldn't just let him be.

"Hey, you should leave the house."

"What?"

"Come to my house. You can take care of the food and the laundry."

"Are you crazy? If father finds out, I'm dead. FUCKING DEAD!"

"You'll die even if you stay here. I don't want to see a news broadcast telling me that a kid died from domestic violence. He crossed the line. Beating up a kid with a golf club? He's out of his mind."

"Go alone. I have to stay here."

Geunseok shook his head and did not move from the spot.

"You're staying here?"

"Don't pretend that you care about me at this point. He does not like you being with me, so just please, just ignore me like you always did! I'm fucking disgusted by you pretending to be a brother after all this time."

Geunseok expressed his animosity. Seeing that, Geunsoo was reminded of a violent dog full of injuries. A pitiful fighting dog that wags its tail to its owner despite being pushed into a dog fight arena; the dog that thinks that it's easier to obey its evil owner rather than biting him and running away. He was pitiful. If it was not for the fact that Geunseok was his brother, he would have called him foolish, rather than sympathize with him.

'But he is my only brother after all.'

He couldn't let Geunseok live and die like a dog without being able to express his own opinions. Geunseok had never defied his father before. His father was also human. He stopped once he felt that it was risky. That could be seen from how he himself just ended with a slap. His father never risked himself by pushing someone that might endanger him into a corner. How devious was that? And that devious man must have seen Geunseok's true nature. He was his own son, it must have been easy to figure out what kind of person Geunseok was. An obedient dog that will never escape his hands. Their father should have evaluated Geunseok as such.

"He might beat you up with a golf club again tonight. Tomorrow, and the day after that will be no different. It might not end. And you're telling me you'll endure all that?"

“...”

“If you can’t resist, then at least you can try to run away. Father will not keep beating you up. That man detests a nick in his reputation more than his death, so he won’t go that far. However, I can assure you this. You will have to continue eating the food that that man gives you and continue living the life that he wants you to. You should be used to that kind of life right now, but you still have the energy to resist. Right now, you can still do it.”

Geunseok clenched his teeth and stared at him.

“If you don’t do it now, you might have to wait for his orders for you to even breathe. Is that how you want your life to be?”

“What do you know about me...”

“I don’t. But I can clearly see how things will go in the future. You’ve already started submitting to that man, so he’ll see you as some kind of doll that he can play around with as he wished. The bruises on your body are proof of that. His control over you will only rise in the future. You’ll eventually find yourself lucky to be just beaten up with a golf club.”

Geunsoo then sighed.

“When I took you to Daehak-ro when you were in middle school, I thought you’d change. I believed that you had developed your own dream. However, you didn’t change at all. You only listened to my words instead of father’s for that brief moment. And now, you’re an obedient kid that follows his father. Geunseok, the only things that don’t express pain are dolls. The less you express yourself, the more father will treat you like a doll.”

“...Just what do you want me to do then?”

“Leave the house. If you can’t resist, then you have to run away. I’m capable of supporting you. Though, you’ll have to support yourself once you’re twenty.”

“Father won’t let me be.”

“You can do what you’re good at.”

“What I’m good at?”

It was at that moment that the door opened after a few beeping noises. Their father entered as he loosened his tie. Geunsoo greeted him with a smile.

“I’m here to visit a little.”

“...Okay.”

“Father, Geunseok has something to say to you.”

Geunsoo grabbed Geunseok’s shoulders and pushed him front. If he wasn’t able to say anything here, he was planning to take him by force.

“Something to say?”



Taking his shoes off, their father slowly approached Geunseok. Geunsoo felt Geunseok shaking. Although Geunseok was more than 10cm taller than his father, his mentality seemed to be younger than a three-year-old's.

"Hong Geunseok. What is it that you have to say to me?"

"I, I, I...."

"Hong Geunseok, what did I teach you? You should always say your words clear and loud."

Hearing those words, Geunseok's shakiness disappeared like magic. Geunsoo smiled bitterly. Their father's shadow that was cast over his younger brother was too thick.

'But still, it worked in a good way.'

Ironically, it seemed that their father's supreme order made Geunseok regain the courage to speak. Though, whether it was indeed 'courage' was another story. In any case, it was a good thing that Geunseok was able to speak now.

"I'll stay at big brother's place for a while. If you don't allow it then...."

Geunseok had a really hard time saying those words. It was as though he was confessing a crime. At the same time, he was rolling up his sleeves. Geunsoo glanced at his father. He could predict the answer.

"Go ahead."

Before Geunseok even finished his words, their father interrupted.

"What?"

"I said go ahead."

Geunsoo pushed the still surprised Geunseok's back.

"You'll see my car once you get down there. You can get on it."

Geunseok staggered as he left. Geunsoo then closed his eyes and looked at his father.

"You're quite something. Now that he's all grown up, you have the thought of beating him up with a golf club?"

"I don't know what you're saying at all. Rather than that, why don't we have a drink after all this time?"

His father took his coat off with a clear smile. Geunsoo felt as though there was a disgusting stench within the house.

"It looks like telling the police won't do anything good since Geunseok will not admit anything. You know, now that I think about it, you wouldn't know how glad I am to have defied you back then. If I kept staying here, I would have the same eyes as him."

"Geunsoo. I really don't get what you're trying to say for a while now. I did pat Geunseok a few times because he didn't obey me. That's something that occurs in every household, isn't it?"

“Really now? I did sometimes see the news telling me that the South Korean domestic disciplinary methods were fantastic, and I see now. So that’s what’s happening in every household. Good to know.”

Geunsoo made the thickest smile he could towards his father. When he did, his father’s smile thickened as well.

“I hope we don’t see each other in court. I mean, I was called a lunatic once, so even I don’t know what I might end up doing once I’m into something.”

“You’ve gotten good with your jokes. Why don’t you join me and my friends for a drink one ti...”

Geunsoo held up his middle finger to his father before leaving the house.

The door slammed shut. The next moment, a loud noise could be heard behind the door. Geunsoo deemed that it was the ceramic vase on top of the shoe rack that just shattered to smithereens. After all, it looked like the perfect shape to throw.

He took the elevator down. He saw Geunseok obediently sitting inside the car. Getting in the driver’s seat, Geunsoo started the car.

“You can wear that to school tomorrow. And get your clothes while father isn’t home. If you don’t want that, then you can just buy them anew. I leave the house a lot, so clean the house and do the laundry. Also, you’ll have to make your own food.”

“...Why do you care about me?”

“Because I don’t want you appearing in my nightmares. I do feel a bit of responsibility as well, and I’m very slightly worried about my foolish little brother. The biggest reason though, is that I don’t want things to go as that man wishes. Put your seatbelt on.”

The roads were dark. Geunsoo gave glances to his little brother while driving. Thanks to the tension leaving his body, he was sleeping. Geunsoo sighed before speeding up, all this while, thinking about what to do with this new little brother of his.

## **Chapter 250**

-I decided to take him in for the time being. I guess I’ll have to first calm him down before thinking about what’s next. Anyway, thanks. I was able to save my brother thanks to you.

Maru closed his phone. Although nothing was ‘solved’, it seemed that he had prevented things from becoming a huge issue. He could leave the rest in Geunsoo’s capable hands.

‘I really wish he gets it together this time and lives a proper life.’

Although people did not change easily, they were just as prone to change after a dramatic experience. Violence wasn’t a positive experience, but it was plenty sufficient to give him a reason to look back at his life.

“Oppa, oppa!”

“What is it?”

Bada was energetic even though it was the morning. Maru stared at the piece of paper that his sister held out to him. It was a piece of paper a little smaller, but thicker, than an A4.

"I heard from mom that you're shooting a movie."

She pushed the paper into Maru's hands.

"You want autographs?"

"Yeah!"

"From who?"

"Joohyun-unni and Suyeon-unni!"

The information regarding the movie from the original work 'Twilight Struggles', titled 'Who Gave the Elder His Hammer', was released onto the internet yesterday. This seemed to be a method to attract attention from potential audience by leaking some information one month prior to the press release. The general outline of the story and the cast was revealed to the public.

"Senior Joohyun seems really popular with girls."

"You've talked with her, oppa?"

Her eyes looked resolute. It was likely that she would ask something unimaginable if he revealed that she was the sister of a junior of his at his school club.

"No, of course not."

"Well, she is a superstar after all. Oppa, you should do better and get closer to her. You should take a photo with her as well!"

"Unfortunately, I won't get to meet her during shooting."

"Why!"

"What do you mean, why? There's no way an extra like me has a scene together with her. I'm just a role that disappears after a single shoot."

"What... you're just a filler?"

"Yes. I'm a filler."

"What about the autograph then?"

She looked pretty dejected. Maru had difficulties saying 'I can't be bothered' to her face.

"I'll do it on one condition."

"Condition?"

"When do midterms start?"

"T-today..."

His sister avoided meeting his eyes as she spoke. As far as Maru knew, she was hanging out with her friends at a noraebang until late into the night yesterday. When Maru looked back at her, Bada made an awkward smile.

“Hey, didn’t you write ‘my aim is Seoul U’ on your wall?”

“I can do well starting tomorrow!”

“What about today?”

“The god of guessing will help me.”

“Did you not study for it at all?”

“I did... a little.”

Maru sighed after seeing his sister laugh awkwardly. Playing around was important for people her age, yes. After all, it would be a college exam hell once she went to high school. However, she was aiming to get into a good high school and Seoul National University. Yet, she still had the audacity to go to a noraebang the day before her test?

“The reason I let you have free rein without saying anything is because I trust that you can take responsibility for your life. You know that, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“So show me then. If you enter the top 5 in the midterms, I’ll get you the autograph of any actor you want.”

“That’s a little....”

“And also, didn’t you like TTO?”

“I do! It’s always been my dream to go to their concert once!”

TTO was a famous idol group that’d been taking first place for the past 3 weeks in a popular music TV program. Maru found out that his sister liked them after seeing his mother and Bada quarrelling over removing posters and whatnot.

He was aware that progress was better than results, but he also knew that sometimes it wasn’t that bad to motivate her using results. Moreover, this was the midterms of her 3rd year of middle school. It would be nonsensical for her to not focus on studying when she was trying to get into a good high school.

“How about some concert tickets for that?”

“Wh, what?”

“You said there was one during the summer holidays. I thought you had a fight with mom for that.”

“Yeah! But she said she’ll never let me because it’s dangerous.”

“I’ll persuade her for you. As long as you get within the top 5.”

“...Are you for real?”

“Can you do it? You’ve been playing around until yesterday.”

“I can do it! No, I will do it. Just watch me. If I do, you’ll really have to get the tickets and mom’s permission, okay? I will not let you go free if you lied to me!”

Bada put her backpack on and left the house with large strides.

“Hooray idols, I guess.”

He experienced for himself the power of the great idols. Midterms on a middle school level weren’t that difficult so she would score well with some last-minute revision. Once she realized that she could do it, then she would be able to take care of herself.

Maru turned off the lights and the gas in the kitchen before leaving the house. The wind was quite warm. It seemed that summer wasn’t that far. On his way to school, Maru came across a CD store that just went out of business. Although people lined up outside this store whenever a new CD album was released during his middle school days, people no longer visited this place, and it seemed that its business was doing bad. Thanks to new technology satisfying the needs of the people much faster, old technology was phasing out and people accepted it as the norm.

In front of a banner advertising discounts on CDs was a lonely life-sized idol cutout. He was reminded of the day he talked about idols with Ganghwan. Ganghwan made a bitter smile, saying that they were an inevitable part of cultural business. The symbiotic relationship was gone and all that was left was competition. There was a limited amount of pie in this small land, yet people struggled to scoop every last bit out. Ganghwan used the analogy of survival when he explained the reason why actors should act like one. In terms of controversy, it was hard to win against idols. Fandoms were stronger on their side as well. As such, the only way to win against them was through acting alone, so he said that it might seem foolish, but it was the only way.

However, at the end of that, Ganghwan also said these words: that the reason for them to be feared is because they had amazing skills.

Maru sped up on his bike after staring at the cutout figure for a while. Although it didn’t feel that real to him, he thought that he would one day be able to understand what Ganghwan was going through.

\* \* \*

“Manager Yoo!”

Kim Dongwook, an entertainment journalist for an internet news company, approached manager Yoo who appeared in front of the convenience store outside the TV station. Manager Yoo tried to run away, but Dongwook was a step faster.

“Don’t be like this. We don’t amount to this much, do we?”

“Ah, yes. Sir.”

“Wow. I heard the rumors. I heard you’re finally graduating road and becoming a team leader.”

“What? Where did you hear something like....”

“I know my way round, you know? Here, drink this, it’s getting hot after all.”

Dongwook gave him a drink that he bought from the convenience store. Manager Yoo declined, but Dongwook forced it on him. Only when the other party drank this would he sense a feel of debt and talk about what he should and what he shouldn’t.

“Manager Yoo, I mean, team leader Yoo! I know that you had your share of suffering in this industry while I worked as a journalist, right? You know, our relationship isn’t that light at all!”

“I-is that so? But sir Kim, I’m not an official team leader yet, so please mind the way you call me....”

“Fine, fine. Look at you, being all humble.”

Dongwook held the drink up to manager Yoo’s face and told him to drink some more. Manager Yoo seemed to have given up as well and just drank while sighing.

“I heard that TTO is doing really good these days. I was surprised. I heard that those girls outside the TV station are all here because of them, right?”

“Yeah, well...,” manager Yoo smiled when his artists were praised.

‘You still have a lot to go.’

This manager Yoo was weak to flattery. These kinds of managers did not last long. Stars were stars, and managers were managers. Despite that, there were cases where road managers mistook the artists’ popularity for theirs. This was the reason behind some news articles mentioning how managers mistreated their artists. However, he was the one wanting something from the other party here, so there was no need to mention that out loud. Dongwook pulled on manager Yoo’s sleeves.

“Come here, the shade is a little cooler.”

“Ah, yes.”

After hesitating a little, Dongwook spoke.

“I wanted to ask. One of your kids is preparing for a movie, right?”

“A movie?” Manager Yoo replied with a puzzled voice. However, Dongwook was able to catch a glimpse of manager Yoo’s lips twitching. TTO was a hot potato. Every form of media was talking about them. Even some local newspapers talked about them. Products advertised by TTO were always sold out, and every place they visited became a tourist hotspot.

Any news regarding TTO was especially important to the girls camping outside the TV station like what he was seeing now. They were the most hardcore fans who were able to utilize the money of their parents. Thanks to that, writing up news about TTO became the shortcut to getting ad revenue and hence the manuscript pay. However, as the company behind TTO kept an iron security around them, it was hard to get anything about them. Although all of their official schedule was revealed on the website, everything else was under tight security so it was hard to find any traces of them in this small

land of South Korea. Some journalists went as far as to say that it was harder to track them than to track the president of the country.

Moreover, thanks to the Korean wave stemming from a Korean drama that aired last year, there was a demand for Korean idols in Japan. It was natural for TTO to be the vanguard. For now, they had a lower popularity than actual drama actors, but most people judged that they would take over sooner or later. Right now, it was still unknown when the Korean wave would end, so everyone was trying to make some money while they still could. The company behind TTO seemed to have realized that and hid every last bit of their artist in order to decrease image consumption. As such, TTO's value kept rising by the day, and now they could be considered one of the top 4 idol groups.

TTO was a moving bundle of cash. Dongwook also wanted to jump on the bandwagon and reap some profits. There was an interesting market where just knowing TTO's next schedule had value. He wasn't able to understand the mindset of those that wanted to know TTO's every single action, but he still jumped on the bandwagon because it made money.

He was waiting for an opportunity when he heard a great rumor. It was a rumor that a member of TTO was participating in the controversial movie 'Who Gave the Elder His Hammer'. Although the cast was revealed on the internet, there was no member of TTO among them.

If it was true that a member of TTO was participating, he would be able to release exclusive news. 'Exclusive' was a magical word. It was especially powerful to him as a powerless internet news journalist. Although the three major news companies and TV journalists got monthly salaries for their jobs, an internet journalist like him without any power had very low base pay, so he couldn't make a living off just that. This was why he needed an exclusive article.

Of course, 9 out of 10 times, the major news companies and TV stations took those exclusive news. Their manpower and financial power was something that minor companies could not hope to beat. However, sometimes, lady luck smiled their way, and now was precisely that case.

It was a coincidence that Dongwook had overheard that a member of TTO was cast in the movie. He was sneaking around in restaurants outside a TV station when one seemingly angry man shouted into his phone and that was related to TTO. Although it might just end up being a 'rumor' article, the fate of journalists was to take a job regardless. Thanks to that, he was trying to eke something out from this foolish road manager.

"Am I wrong? I was pretty sure though."

"N-no way. It's not something I know either."

"Really?"

"Yes, of course."

"You're not hiding anything from me?"

"How could I hide anything from you?"

"I guess you aren't that kind of person."

Dongwook patted manager Yoo's back with a smile. Manager Yoo smiled in relief. Dongwook felt that now was the moment as he asked.

"But was Hyuktae always that good at acting?"

"Sorry? It's not Hyuktae but Sungjae..." realizing his mistake, manager Yoo shut himself up. Dongwook raised his thumb up.

"I'll write it then, okay?"

Manager Yoo grabbed him and spoke.

"You can't. If you do, I'll be in big trouble. No, you'll be in big trouble."

"I do want big trouble though."

Dongwook smirked and put a hand on manager Yoo's shoulder.