

Yoo Chinmae slipped out of the Campus' main gates to jog through the streets, skipping his usual morning workout with the guys. His bodyguard, Lee Min-Jae, ran just behind him, keeping watch while still giving him space to be alone—as alone as possible in downtown Seoul.

Winding through the smaller avenues and alleyways in the sweet hour between late-night cleaning staff and early-morning office workers, Chinmae could almost breathe, almost think.

The Campus—a mini music complex built in Seoul by the South Korean Entertainment Corporation—was always loud and crowded. It teemed with artists and staff of all kinds, some coming and going daily and others living onsite in the dorms, like he did, rarely escaping its grind.

For just a moment, he needed an escape from the overwhelming claustrophobia of the place.

Step by step, pounding through the miles, Chinmae kept an eye on his watch as he clocked himself, then glanced over his shoulder to see if Min-Jae was keeping up. He knew he ran at a grueling

pace but wasn't ready to slow down.

He was desperate for privacy. Desperate for just five minutes of normalcy. Desperate for a break.

Jogging around the glow of each streetlight to stay in the fading shadows of the skyscrapers, he maintained his usual tempo until he reached the main thoroughfare of Hakdong-ro.

He looked at his watch again and did the math in his head, calculating how much time he had left before he needed to return to Campus for practice.

If I keep running straight ahead, I could leave Seoul and all of this behind. Anywhere would be preferable to here.

What I wouldn't give for a new, different life.

Acting, singing, and being one of the lead dancers of Insatiable7, or IN7, SKEC's top K-pop group, came naturally to him, but never by passion or choice. Whether on set or on stage, everything came down to pretending.

My entire life is fake.

It was frustrating and exhausting to be isolated in a sea of people who didn't know the real him. Even after seven years of living and working with his friends and fellow group members, he still felt like an outsider. He simply… existed in their boisterous, lively shadow.

The street grew crowded as the hot summer sun rose, forcing Chinmae to slow his pace. Seoul was

massive, and the area around Campus was one of its busiest sections. Dozens of cars and scores of people moved in every direction, even at this early hour.

Min-Jae, his ever-present and crucial shadow, drew closer, eyes scanning the thickening crowd. At the next light, he called for a halt. "Chinmae-ssi, how about we take a break? Let's get off the street and let this wave of people pass."

It had been weeks since Chinmae last walked outside alone. Even then, he'd only escaped to the nearest library on their day off, reading in a corner. After being cooped up at work for so long, he'd forgotten that his clothes and hair—neither out of the ordinary on Campus—were conspicuous identifiers for the public. Now he drew attention, and encountering strangers face-to-face made his heart race.

Chinmae was about to suggest another quieter alleyway when he noticed Min-Jae looked ready to drop. The short, burly guard was a better wrestler than sprinter. He never complained though, and over the last four years, as IN7's popularity grew—along with the need for Chinmae's protection—the pair had become something like friends.

He dreaded returning early, but Min-Jae was right: he needed to get off the street. "Mmm, sure. We're done. Let's stop and rest at a coffee shop."

He re-tucked his sweaty purple hair inside his ball cap and prepared to cross Hakdong-ro toward the nearest cafe. First one car, then another, blared their horns obnoxiously. He looked, trying to find the reason

for the commotion, and spotted a wounded, frightened dog struggling to stand in the middle of the intersection.

Glancing around, he saw some in the crowd were horrified, but no one seemed willing to help. Keeping an eye on the countdown crosswalk timer, he prayed the poor animal could wait. *Five…Four…Three…*

As soon as the coast cleared, Chinmae sprinted, dodging around a car attempting an illegal red turn, with Min-Jae on his heels.

It looked like a large terrier, starved and flea-ridden, with at least one broken leg. Terrified and barely able to move, it still shied away as they drew near.

The stink of sewer and a cold tang of underlying fear hit Chinmae first. He rested a gentle hand on the puppy's head. "Help me!" he called out to his guard.

Together, they carefully lifted the animal into Chinmae's arms, avoiding its injuries.

The pedestrian countdown signal started flashing, and he quickly scanned the row of businesses around him. *Only ten seconds left! We gotta get off the street!*

Spotting a sign with paw prints halfway down the block, he said, "There! It's a vet's office. Let's go!" He took off again, not waiting for Min-Jae.

The poor animal may have been skin and bones, but it was still cumbersome and tried to nip at him as he ran down the sidewalk.

Min-Jae banged on the locked door, waving to two women standing behind the counter in the dim interior, lit only by lights in the back room.

The taller of the two turned with a frown until she spotted the wounded animal. She rushed to the door, let them in, then ran to the back room for help.

"She was hit by a car!" Chinmae yelled, nearly panicked as he stumbled inside with his heavy load.

The second woman—petite with wild, wavy hair—glared up at him before focusing on the dog. "Where's her leash? She's in horrible shape! You're so irresponsible!"

"She's not my dog!"

The woman never looked up, never stopped inspecting the whimpering, shivering animal in his arms. Then she clutched his sleeve and dragged him down a hall to the left, throwing open doors as they passed until she found one she liked.

Smacking her palm on the empty table, she expertly started hitting buttons on a large rolling monitor, firing it up before picking up the leads and sorting them out.

Chinmae did as she directed, glancing at his guard, who lingered in the doorway. He turned back to the lady, trying to make her understand what had just happened on the road. "She's not my dog! She got hit in the intersection."

He repeated it to the rapidly filling room as staff

rushed in from the back.

The lady ignored him, attaching the leads to the whimpering animal.

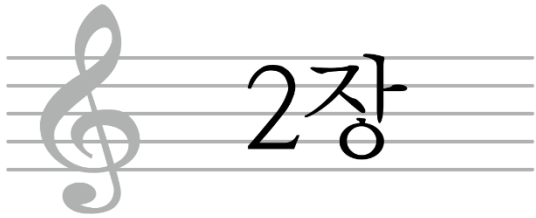
As she turned on the other equipment, a staff member handed her a stethoscope Chinmae had never seen before. The monitor beeped to life, and the tech pointed to him, then signed. "He says she's not his and was hit at the intersection."

Pursing her lips, she flicked a glance his way before she checked the injured animal from nose to tail. After attaching the leads, she turned on the handheld device on her stethoscope, not bothering to lift the earpieces from where they hung around her neck. She read the vitals on the device and the rolling monitor closely.

One hand roamed with the chest piece of her stethoscope while the other moved over the dog's legs, back, and belly, feeling for more injuries. Her hands and eyes filled in what her ears couldn't grasp before she focused on the broken leg.

When her staff brought her the tools she'd asked for, she remembered he was there. Glancing up, she waved him away like a gnat and returned to her work.

Not ready to be dismissed, Chinmae smacked the table within her vision and answered her in Korean Sign Language. "No. I'm staying."



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The doctor raised one eyebrow slightly in acknowledgment, then gestured. “Fine. Hold her head still.”

The tech approached with a syringe, and soon the injured animal drifted off to sleep. Chinmae rubbed her ears and watched the pain-filled eyes close.

For thirty minutes, he petted the sleeping dog and squished any fleas he found while watching the doctor and her assistant set the broken leg and dislocated hip. Green and nauseated, he almost retched when she yanked the hip bone back into the socket with a loud, sucking pop.

Everyone else in the room rolled their eyes and tried not to laugh. Min-Jae shoved a trash can between Chinmae’s knees, then abandoned him for the waiting room.

The can sat unused, even though he desperately wanted to puke. Chinmae refused to appear weak.

Peeling off her gloves, Hana rested a hand on the animal’s ribs and closed her eyes, breathing with her, letting her warmth seep into the injured dog. Knowing

you were safe and feeling safe were two entirely different things. Animals, even under sedation, deserved someone who stayed an extra minute.

After one last check of the dog's vitals and the fresh bandages, she scribbled instructions for the staff, then left the room. Fumbling under her hair, she removed her hearing aids and turned them off before they could howl.

Halfway to her office at the end of the hall, she stopped and rolled her eyes.

Dang it. I forgot about that guy.

Backtracking, she leaned in the doorway and smacked the frame. When he looked up, she gestured with her finger for him to follow.

He peeked at the tech still with him, who jerked her head toward the doctor, brows raised to indicate he was the one being summoned. Chinmae straightened his sore back and hesitantly followed the doctor down the hall.

She discreetly stored her devices in their case, then sat behind her desk. When he didn't move, she gave a slight huff and pointed to the other chair impatiently.

The clean, warm paneled office looked inviting; a stark contrast to her sharp stare. He looked down the hall for an escape route before reluctantly obeying.

She regarded him for a long time and he wasn't sure he measured up.

Nervously, he yanked on his hat, which went askew amid the chaos, and stopped himself before he could check whether his zipper was up. Or whether he even had a zipper. The sweat from his earlier run had dried in the cold air of the clinic, leaving him sticky and stiff.

She spoke aloud while using her hands. "You sign?"

"Yes." He hadn't signed since his last visit to Grandfather's home along the shore, and the movements came back slower than he expected. But watching her work with her staff, signing and speaking, he found his knowledge of KSL quickly returning.

"Okay. Well. Thank you for helping. She's not your dog?"

Chinmae just shook his head.

"We checked. She's not microchipped. If you'd like, you can take her home in a few days."

He shook his head again. "I can't take her. My place isn't good for animals."

He lived in a dorm with hundreds of other people—when he was home and not on tour. His parents' home was an absolute no—not even a remote chance in hell—and Grandfather was too old.

Who was this guy? she wondered. His cold, expressionless eyes offered no help. She could read details from strangers, but not from him. Yet, he could sign. She remembered the deep rumble of his voice in her head from when he first spoke; The sound that

slid easily into her limited hearing range before the noisy chaos of the exam room covered it up.

"Why then?" she finally asked, furrowing her brows. "Why did you help?"

Chinmae didn't understand the ridiculous question. "Why not? She was hurt."

She chose not to respond, knowing the world was filled with more people who gawked and did nothing than those who helped someone—or something—in need.

After another moment of observing him and gaining nothing, she stood and walked out, snatching her lab coat from the tree rack behind the door, leaving him to trail behind.

They went to check on the sleeping dog and watched the tech clean the abrasions, shaving her for a flea dip. The doctor spoke as she signed. "She's a rare pure breed. A Jindo terrier. You can name her."

"Whoa—me?" Chinmae pointed to himself, eyes wide with surprise. He'd never named a dog before. He went to pet her pointy ears one last time, then paused to think. "Ara."

Both women nodded in agreement. *Gentle, grace, endure.* It suited her.

Chinmae and Min-Jae slowly walked back to Campus together, weaving around the larger clumps of pedestrians rushing single-mindedly to their office buildings.

I didn't even get her name. The realization annoyed him as he walked with his guard, avoiding other people on the now crowded sidewalk. Chinmae kept his eyes low, making sure his hat thoroughly covered his hair. Min-Jae stepped in front of him to block the oncoming group of pedestrians.

Two girls near the bus stop froze, eyes widening. One face rose. Then another. The crowd of office workers that usually moved down the sidewalk like a school of fish shifted, slow and steady. A new prey had entered their waters.

Instantly, his mind replayed the last ten seconds, but he couldn't figure out where he had gone wrong. He'd seen this since childhood on film sets. Once someone stopped, others slowed. Within seconds, he was no longer invisible.

He heard Min-Jae's rumbling growl. The sudden warm, controlling pressure of his guard's hand at his lower back.

"Move," Min-Jae whispered.

Chinmae was already moving. Already ducking his head, adjusting his hat.

"Chinmae-oppa!" "IN7! Are there others here?" "He's so tall!" Chinmae heard them. Most didn't bother hiding their whispers.

Phones materialized in his periphery as the crowd grew—that invisible current of everyone finding a new direction to stare and record. Then magically they swirled around him and the wide sidewalk became

microscopic.

Min-Jae guided him, threading their way to the corner. They'd practiced this like other people practice fire drills. After four years together, the move had become instinctual. Every airport, fan event, and concert, some version of that same comforting, guiding palm got Chinmae through the worst unscathed.

A hand closed around his wrist. "Chinmae-oppa?! Can I have an autograph?"

The trembling hand of a teenage fan made Chinmae forget to breathe. His body slammed into lockdown mode. Any warmth he'd still carried from the vet clinic vanished as his features slid into their performative calm—flat and practiced.

He'd nurtured this mask since childhood, when he learned not to flinch from his father's tight grip or the handlers' touch on a movie set. He'd mastered wearing it long before IN7's meteoric rise to fame.

Stopping and turning, Chinmae smiled at the fan. Because that was what Yoo Chinmae of IN7 was supposed to do.

Min-Jae halted beside him, not blocking the path but subtly widening his stance to create breathing space.

The girl pushed a notebook toward him and Chinmae signed it, aware of the slight tremor of excitement in her voice, the way the papers shook in her hands. He hated that someone who truly knew

nothing personal about him had this level of admiration toward him. He knew there was nothing he could do about it.

He signed another autograph. Then one more, feeling cameras on him the entire time. Chinmae nodded and smiled. Agreed to a few high-fives, artfully dodged several hands reaching to touch him. With a last wave goodbye, he and Min-Jae continued on, measured and precise.

Rounding the corner with barely a glance over his shoulder, Min-Jae found the first recessed doorway and thrust Chinmae inside, then stood in front, blocking the world from view.

Chinmae pressed against the door and viciously worked against his internal riptide. *One breath in for four, hold… release. Repeat.*

Opening his clenched fists, he flattened them against his thighs, trying to ground the tremors and calm his pulse.

Minutes ago he'd been fine in the clinic. Now he stood huddled against a door on the verge of panic.

He hated this. He never asked for this.

"You ready?" Min-Jae asked over his shoulder, eyes on the road.

"Sure."

Min-Jae fished into his pocket and pulled out a mask, handing it over. It was clean but slightly soggy

from being in his pocket all morning.

Chinmae grimaced but put it on. He'd forgotten his and had no room to complain.

Pushing off the glass door, he stepped back onto the sidewalk and fell into step with his guard. For the next three blocks, his eyes never left Min-Jae's shoes and he kept his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his joggers.



Thankfully, IN7 only had a morning meeting, and no one noticed Chinmae and Min-Jae slip in late.

It was one of those large all-hands-on-deck meetings in an auditorium-style classroom. They squeezed in the back between a makeup artist and a guy Chinmae recognized from the lighting crew. The rest of his friends and teammates sat near the front, while Manager Kim and the assistant managers droned on about the tour and stage design planned for the *Galaxy* album.

Chinmae leaned against the wall and let his mind drift. He tried to get past the incident on the street. Time and space gave him perspective, and he knew rationally that the fan interaction this morning was mild and that Min-Jae had handled it well.

That didn't mean he liked it.

A new stage crew member in the seats below asked about a venue in Busan. Chinmae listened to

Manager Kim's response before his thoughts returned to the well-run clinic. To the dog he named Ara. To the doctor he'd just met.

Her quiet competence. The way she looked at him. The sign language. None of it made sense. He wasn't sure what bothered him most.

The crowd around him started clapping, and he snapped out of his thoughts to join in, watching the throng disperse.

"So, you *were* here," Paek Jaemin called out as he and the rest of the IN7 guys reached the back of the room. "We saved you a seat."

The six tall men shuffled closer and stood like rocks in the flowing stream of people, blocking Chinmae and his guard from the crush.

"I didn't want to sit, so we've been back here the whole time," Chinmae responded, and Min-Jae kept his mouth shut, his feet braced apart.

"Here's your handout. We must have run out when they were passed around." Kim Baebin handed over a stack of papers that everyone else in the room had carried out with them. "And this is the group packet." He fished the information booklet, which only the seven of them received, out of his backpack.

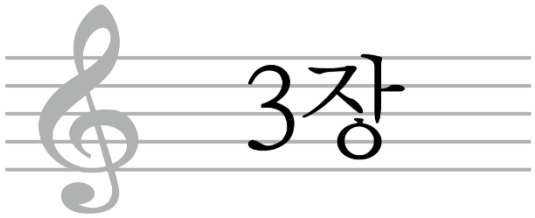
Chinmae took the papers from his friend, his expression controlled and neutral.

"I'm hungry. Let's beat the crowd to the cafeteria," Chun Daeho whined, itching to get

outside.

The other six returned a unified, automatic response: "You're always hungry." Still, the group threaded their way into the moving mass and left the room.

Chinmae glanced back at Min-Jae who had joined his own group and was speaking with Chu Kwan, Baebin's bodyguard. As if sensing his need, Min-Jae looked up directly at Chinmae, nodded once in understanding, then returned to his colleagues.



For the second time in four days, Chinmae and Min-Jae ran through the city streets and alleyways of Seoul.

This time, Chinmae came better prepared. A thin beanie completely covered his hair, fake, black-framed glasses obscured his eyes, and a mask hung around his chin. He stayed in step with Min-Jae, careful not to stray too far ahead.

The ring of mountains surrounding the city trapped the heat and oppressive humidity. Even in the early dawn, the air pressed unbearably on him.

Jogging past businesses still closed, which sat next to twenty-four-hour convenience stores, he spotted a familiar figure leaving a parking garage. He picked up his pace and pulled off the mask before reaching her, waving a hand in her side view.

Hana recoiled in shock. *Oi! What the…?!* Looking up, she recognized the man beside her. She took in the beanie, the glasses, and the damp shirt that clung to his skin. His broad, muscled chest rose and fell with each quick breath. "Oh… You. You helped with Ara."

"Yes. How is she?"

Those light brown eyes—which had widened slightly in shock when he startled her—skimmed down to his mouth as he spoke, and he felt their unblinking stare.

Hana eyed the mostly empty street before signing. "She's good. Better. Still at the clinic. I came early to take her outside."

He didn't say anything, but Hana could see a gentle release around his jaw and shoulders. *He really does care about Ara.* "Would you like to visit her?"

She saw a stir in the black depths of his eyes before he looked away. Hana followed his gaze to the boulder of a man standing behind her and startled again.

Hana followed as best she could while the pair discussed their schedule before Chinmae turned to her. "You don't mind? I'd like to see Ara."

Surprisingly, she wasn't annoyed at the idea of him intruding on her work today. The walk seemed immeasurable, and she felt like a small child next to the two men.

This time Chinmae read the sign on the door. PetSeouls, Kim Hana, VMD.

Was she Kim Hana? he wondered. *Did she have a partner or own the place herself?*

Several dogs barked in the back, and a magenta light flickered throughout the office as she opened the door and the three stepped inside.

Chinmae stood with Min-Jae in the shadowed lobby, unsure what to do as Hana hurried to the tiny lunchroom for water bottles and swapped her outdoor shoes for slip-ons. Pulling his hat lower, he tucked the damp stray wisps back inside and set his glasses and mask on a chair.

"Thanks for stopping for a moment. I just wanted to see Ara."

Yeah, sure. The dog, Min-Jae mused. *But I'll do anything to stop running with you.* Biting his lip to stifle a smile, he gripped the counter and stretched his hamstrings. "Mmm. No worries. It's too hot out there, anyway."

Chinmae grunted in agreement and looked anxiously at his sweat-soaked shirt. "Do I smell?" *This wasn't a good idea. I shouldn't have come after running.*

Min-Jae gave a sniff just as Hana returned and handed them the water. "There's more in the lunchroom. And a sink if you want to wash up." Hana spoke aloud for the giant's benefit and signed to Chinmae.

Min-Jae pointed down the hall where she'd indicated. "I'll do that. Thank you. You two go ahead."

Chinmae and Hana nodded and turned to leave. Min-Jae giggled as he watched his ward follow the lady to the back. *Aww! My little baby is going on a playdate!* "Chinmae-ssi!" he hissed. When Chinmae turned around, Min-Jae gave a thumbs-up. "You smell fine. Have fun, you two!"

He grinned as Chinmae's ears reddened and his

upper lip twitched, as if he wanted to retort but couldn't quite bring himself to.

Her pink clogs squeaked on the vinyl floor as she guided him to the back, where Ara lay on a bed in the lower corner cage. Hana opened the door and slid out the removable tray that held the dog. "Help me stand her up."

He nearly laughed at Ara's new baby pink T-shirt, the hem tied into a knot at her back. Crouching down, he straightened the fabric across the dog's narrow shoulders.

Hana handed him a leash and gestured to the shirt he was inspecting. "Without her fur, she gets cold. And the shirt keeps her from scratching at her sores."

"Ah." Chinmae grinned openly, checking where she stood behind him so he could sign. "I thought it was just a fashion statement." Then he asked Ara, "You like your shirt, baby girl?"

He focused on his job and gently lifted Ara to stand on three legs. The fourth leg stuck out at an odd angle, encased in a neon green cast, and her back half was wrapped in bandages. Less than a week after her accident, Ara already looked stronger. Still, it only took a few minutes to tire her out.

When Chinmae glanced at her, she noted his stillness had returned, but a slight smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. Watching the pair as they carefully stepped back inside, Hana surprised herself. "I was going to work on Ara this morning. If you hold her, it'll go faster."

Nodding, he sat on the floor and held Ara, while Hana unwound the dressing, checking the skin and probing the hip joint.

Ara yipped when Hana pressed on a particularly painful spot, and Chinmae cradled her head, scratching an ear until she eased back against him.

Hana's gaze darted up, taking in Chinmae's thoughtful care as he comforted the nervous puppy.

"You're good with her," she said as she continued to inspect the wound.

Chinmae let the fingers of one hand pull back enough to sign. "Thanks. Ara's sweet. I think... she just needs someone to tell her it'll be okay."

He held Ara again, feeling the tremors subside slightly. "I don't think anyone's told you that, huh, Ara?" he whispered to the dog. "You're safe now, baby girl. You're in good hands with Dr. Kim."

Hana unintentionally read Chinmae's lips in his private conversation with the puppy. Something about the hushed tenderness… She'd seen that quiet posture before—on animals who'd been handled roughly and learned to stay motionless. Controlled stillness. But he let it slip with the dog. Just a little.

Since losing most of her hearing, she'd rebuilt her whole life around paying attention to clues beyond sound. But this man… was like a chart with half the data missing.

His almond eyes were so black, and they held almost no emotion. He was like a blank screen; his

wide, smooth face locked in a perpetual frown. *I'll admit he* is *hot,* Hana grudgingly conceded. *I'm deaf, not blind.*

Shaking the thoughts from her head, she quickly re-wrapped Ara's hip and backed away. "Stay there a moment."

Hana prepared bowls of food and water, set them nearby, and signed to Chinmae, "Could you watch her eat? I don't want her going too fast and choking."

"No problem."

He steadied Ara and nudged the bowl away when she insisted on inhaling her breakfast. While she ate, Chinmae finally had a chance to take in the clinic.

Already acclimated to the strong antiseptic smell mixed with the usual animal odors, Chinmae liked the spotless counters with their labeled drawers. One long wall was lined with solid melamine cages for the overnight guests.

His gaze repeatedly drifted to the doctor. He couldn't help but watch as she removed her hearing aids, wrapping a thick ribbon around her head before examining a stack of charts.

He stayed with Ara for several minutes after she finished eating, then grudgingly put her back in her cage. Curious about the other animals, he crouched down to get a better view of a bird.

Hana joined him and pointed, "You see the flaky scales on his legs? This poor baby has an infection."

Hana brought over a jar of coconut oil and handed it to him. "I'll hold him, and you can rub some of this on both his legs. It'll soothe the itch as he heals."

With a nudge and a bit of guidance, he scooped a dollop of the sticky substance and gingerly held out his forefinger, letting the yellow bird grip it tightly with its claw. Grimacing, he smeared it around the stick-like legs.

This has to be the strangest thing I've ever done.

It wasn't just the bird's foot clutching his finger that rattled him; it was Hana's nearness—so close he could smell strawberries. As one of the tallest members of IN7 and the entire SKEC company, Chinmae stood well over six feet, yet she barely reached his heart.

Being extra cautious around people he met was as natural as breathing, but Kim Hana unsettled him in ways he hadn't expected. He bit the inside of his cheek and felt his mask of control waver.

Capping the jar, Chinmae retreated to the sink to wash. When Hana joined him, he signed, "I'll never be able to eat dakbal again. How can I order fried chicken feet without being a murderer?"

"They say farmers don't name their livestock for that reason." Hana nodded seriously, but something in her eyes sparkled. "I know I shouldn't be, but I'm a voracious carnivore. I'm a vet, and I love animals, but I also love barbecued pork belly."

Chinmae laughed—a real laugh that surprised them both. "That's... actually kind of terrible."

"I know." She grinned, unapologetic. "At least I'm honest about it."

The sound of his voice rang low in her head, catching her off guard. Hana wondered if she could make him laugh again.

Sobering, he watched her tidy up the splatters with paper towels. "Honesty is rare."

She glanced from his fingers to his shuttered expression, catching something beneath the comment. There it was again. That brief shift before the door locked back into place. For someone so striking, he carried himself as if trying to disappear. Or at least hide his true self.

She sat on a stool, gestured to the one across from her, and handed him a water bottle. "You talk like people lie to you a lot. About your work? About the group you perform with?"

She knew better than to respond to his cryptic comment, but she wanted to fill in one blank on her mental chart. He made her curious.

His eyes darted up to hers in shock, his spine tightening imperceptibly. "You know who I am?" *She gave no indication she knew. Was she only playing me? Lying?*

"Well, no. Not really." Hana lifted one shoulder, barely perceptible. "Ji-Woo, my secretary, told me. She said you're a singer from the company up the street."

Chinmae let out the smallest breath. "Yes, I'm Yoo Chinmae. I live on my company's Campus. That's why I can't

take Ara."

"Ah, that makes sense." She shrugged, a funny, self-deprecating gesture, and flicked a finger toward her ear. "I haven't heard you. Sorry. Do you like what you do?"

Chinmae liked her quirky humor and half-smile, but he hesitated before answering. It wasn't the question itself. It was—more like *how* she asked it—that caught him off guard. As if she genuinely wanted to hear the answer.

People usually just wanted to know about the fame, the fun, the tours. Not anything personal. Not the pressure and the exhausting effort behind it all.

"I do. Somewhat. But… What I do is just…"

Hana tipped her head, watching as he peeled the label off his bottle.

He frowned and squirmed in his seat, watching the words escape his fingers. "I like recording. The practice." He looked at his hands, then stopped.

Hana's brows drew together, but she stayed quiet.

He looked away, knowing he hadn't explained it well. "I like the work before people see it."

When he didn't continue, she gave a slight knowing nod. "The public part. I hate that too."

He looked at her, surprised. "But you work with people all the time."

"No. I work with animals," she said with a rueful smile.

“The owners are the necessary evil that comes with them.”

Her smile flattened. “I hate being stared at. They don’t know me and yet make poor assumptions.”

“Most assumptions are wrong. Especially when people don’t take the time to—” Chinmae clenched his fists before he could continue. He frowned at himself. Not sure why he’d signed in the first place.

A magenta light over the hall door pulsed seconds before a shriek tore through the empty clinic.

Chinmae lurched, every muscle coiled tight. Across from him, Hana jolted as well. His eyes flicked to her for a split second before snapping back to the lobby.

Hana gaped at the light still flashing and checked the mirror over the doorframe while one hand jerked to her ear. Something... A spike in the constant hum, a vibration charged in the air around them.

They sprinted to the lobby and stopped dead.

The secretary shrieked again, flailing her purse at the alleged intruder, as Min-Jae tried to dodge and explain. Grabbing the strap, he yanked the woman close and pinned her arms—narrowly avoiding a headbutt.

Ji-Woo paused mid-struggle and drew a breath as she spotted Chinmae. Her eyes slid from the idol to the hulking monster she’d found lounging inside the locked clinic. “Oh…”

Min-Jae felt the secretary's heart hammering

against his chest even as she slowly relaxed, and he finally trusted her enough to let go.

Grinning, Chinmae waded in to separate the combatants while Hana flipped on the lights and disabled the door alert on the side wall.

Ji-Woo jerked several paces back, eyeing the trio and narrowing her gaze at her giggling friend.

"Sorry. He's with me," Chinmae signed and spoke. The two combatants bowed stiffly to each other, keeping their distance.

"Mmm. Sorry," Ji-Woo mumbled to the beast of a man. "I recognize you now from the other day. I thought you were a robber or something."

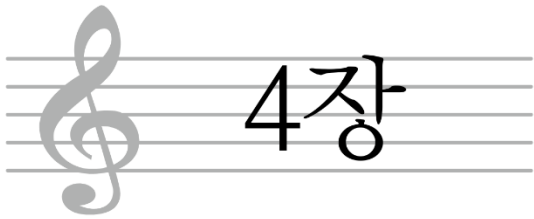
"Not hardly!" But inwardly, Min-Jae thought, *She's kinda cute when she's not screaming in my ear.*

Still miffed, Ji-Woo took in the guard's smile and those strong arms now crossed over his chest. *Humph! What the heck? Don't laugh at me!*

Chinmae bent down and scooped up Min-Jae's phone, which had slid under the chair during their scuffle. "I think we should go." Turning to Hana, he nodded. "Thanks for letting us cool off inside and for taking such good care of Ara. We'll come back another time."

"Without him." Ji-Woo huffed, then noticed everyone staring at her.

Min-Jae eyed her coolly and didn't feel the need to respond to the jab. *I'm the one who got hit for no reason. She has no idea what I could've done to her.*



Ji-Woo ran around, clearing her work surface, as the bell above the door jingled. She smiled. She was getting used to seeing one of her favorite idols come and go at odd hours over the last few weeks.

Glancing behind him, she didn't see the hulking bodyguard and bit back a pout. Since the morning she'd tried to head-butt him, she'd wanted to apologize, but the few times she'd seen him at the door, he'd walked away quickly, and she was too proud to chase him down the sidewalk.

More remarkably, Ji-Woo couldn't figure out Hana over the last few weeks. Still the usual reserved workaholic, uninterested in anything but animals, Ji-Woo kept finding her friend staring into space or loitering at the front desk.

"Hello, Chinmae!" Ji-Woo waved in greeting as she powered off her computer. "Cutting it close."

"Hello. How was it today?"

Circling the desk with her purse in hand, Ji-Woo moaned. "Busy as usual. I've gotta run. Lock up behind me. You don't need to set the light alarm on the door unless you leave before Hana does."

Chinmae stopped her as she headed out. "Um... This is for you." He handed her a large gift bag. "Dr. Kim said you were a fan, so I wanted to get you something."

She peered into the bag, stuffed full of IN7 memorabilia, and gave a muffled squeal before slapping it shut, staring at him wide-eyed. "Whoa! You didn't have to do that!"

Tugging at his sleeve, he studied a scuff on the floor. "It's nothing."

"It is to me. This is really kind of you." Ji-Woo gave a slight bow in thanks, taking another happy peek inside the bag before pointing toward the back room. "I'm actually glad you're here. She's planning to work late, but maybe you can convince her to go home."

"I'll try." He nodded and locked the door behind her before stepping through to the back.

He found Hana spraying down the counter and tables with disinfectant. The sharp, fake-lemon smell probably lived in the walls after all these years. She had her back to him, bobbing her head and swaying, her free hand waving to some unheard beat. He stood there longer than necessary, just watching her dance to a song only she could hear.

He was in a foul mood the entire day, yet he had no idea why. Practice was fine, and the costume fitting went smoothly. Everything had been fine in that eventless way he loved and appreciated—normally.

Shaking away his wandering thoughts, he flicked the lights off and on, announcing his presence.

Hana looked up as the light blinked. Her thoughts quickly shifted from her own embarrassment at being caught dancing to his tight jaw and stiff shoulders. The unusual stillness, even for him.

"Animal control dropped off a few feral cats today," Hana said as she peeled off her orange cleaning gloves and replaced them with thinner latex ones. "You're welcome to take Ara outside to play, but..." She skimmed him briefly, sideways. "If you want to be useful, I could use a second pair of hands."

Hana set a medical tray on the steel counter next to a stack of files and opened the top chart to the first page.

Chinmae crossed the room and reached for extra-large gloves before leaning over her shoulder to study a picture of a cat stapled to the inside cover. When he retrieved the kitten, he received a long scratch on his forearm in payment for disturbing its rest.

For over an hour, he assisted Hana with her work. Chinmae learned how to hold an angry cat while avoiding most of its teeth and claws as she checked old wounds and the fresh surgical incisions from this morning's procedures.

The hushed stillness of the back room and the comfort of the simple, repeated task lowered his anxiety. For the first time all day, his mind cleared. When she put away the last file, he signed, keeping his eyes fixed on her shoulder. "Thanks for letting me help, Dr. Kim."

Hana tipped her head, studying the subtle change in him. "I should be thanking you. That would have taken me all night. And you don't have to keep calling me Dr. Kim. I'm Hana."

She peeled off her gloves and reached for the soap, not looking at him. "And for God's sake, don't call me noona. I hate that."

A smile tugged at Chinmae's cheek for the first time all evening. He couldn't bring himself to sign her name yet, but he appreciated her acceptance, even if she was older than he was. Here, he was simply a man doing odd jobs and visiting the animals.

"Are you like this at work?" Hana asked suddenly, looking over her shoulder, soap up to her elbows.

"Wha—?" He froze mid-motion while stripping off his gloves and looked up sharply.

Hana focused again on washing. "Animals can sense when caring is an act. You're so calm and focused. That's why they like you." She shrugged as if it were obvious. "I was just wondering if you're like this at work—not when you're the 'public you.'"

Chinmae studied her turned head. Over the last few weeks, he'd grown accustomed to her abrupt questions that made him think. After the first day, she never asked anything else about what he did. Instead, she simply let him be. Let him decide what to share about IN7, and the life that came with it.

'*The public you.*' He didn't know many people who understood the difference. Even on Campus,

among staff and co-workers, Chinmae couldn't tell whether they saw the version of himself that existed for others or whatever was left underneath.

He joined her at the sink, enjoying the water stinging the fresh claw marks on his forearms. When Hana looked up at him, Chinmae finally had to answer. "I'm the quietest, but we're all focused. I work hard to not let the group down."

Let the group down? He talks like the group's work isn't his own. Like they're two separate things. Hana's gaze alternated between Chinmae's hands and his thoughtful frown. As always, he only brought up more questions she hesitated to ask.

Chinmae turned away from her probing and continued washing his arms, counting the scratches.

Hana let him go and rifled through the first aid cabinet. When he finished, she gently tapped the metal table and pointed at his usual stool. Unscrewing the cap, she scooped out a dollop of antibiotic cream and gestured for his arm.

He hesitated for a moment, staring at her open hand and the waiting cream, before resting his hand palm-up on the table.

Hana worked on his arms. The same gentle, calming touch she gave to the animals she treated. But this time, it was him. For a second, he forgot to breathe. Her light caress and the cool ointment almost made him wish he had more scratches.

As always with them, the silence stretched.

Comfortable. Without the need to fill it with anything unnecessary.

Outside the back door, city lights lit the dark night. *She's still heading home late. I promised Ji-Woo and failed.*

When Hana finally capped the jar, Chinmae asked, "That's all for tonight, right? You can drive okay?"

"Sure." Hana slipped out of her clogs and swapped them for her street shoes, which she kept at the end of the counter. "My car is in the garage down the street."

"I know. But—"

"But what? Because I'm deaf, I shouldn't drive? Or not at night?" She eyed him reproachfully. "I have no—"

"Hey!" Chinmae's hand shot up, stopping her tantrum. "I never said you *can't* drive. It's not about you being deaf." From his experience with his grandfather, he knew some of the most capable drivers were hard of hearing.

"I'm only worried because you've worked a long day, and I don't want you to fall asleep on the road!"

"Oh." She took a beat to frown at him, fingers hovering in the air before she thought to answer. "I'll be fine. I do better driving at night, anyway. I can see emergency lights better."

"Okay. Let me walk you to the parking garage."

Chinmae woke Ara, who was dozing in the corner, and put her back in the cage for the night, keeping Hana in his side view.

"You don't have to." She squinted at the clock. "I should leave now so Mrs. Cho doesn't have to babysit any longer. You probably need to get home yourself."

Hana stacked the files, adding them to a pile for Ji-Woo to use in billing the city tomorrow.

Turning to see if Chinmae had finished, she found him gaping at her, puzzled.

"Huh? The... babysitter?"

Something about his blank, stricken look made her freeze. Suddenly, Hana's hand flew up to block the loud snort that escaped. "My family. Pets. Animals!" She bit her lip as the color in Chinmae's face went from white to deep red. "You thought...? No. I just have a lot of animals, and my neighbor comes over to take care of them when I work late."

"Animals..." Chinmae groaned in utter embarrassment. "I thought—"

"Kids?"

"Of course you'd have a family waiting—"

"My family is a crazy bunch of animals." She grinned.

The air thickened as they both worked to arrange their chaotic thoughts, unable to look directly at each other. One wrong glimpse might set off another wave of embarrassment.

"Sooo... Pets?" Chinmae finally asked.

"Mmm." Hana chewed her lip, fighting a smile. "A bird, a rabbit, two cats, and three dogs." When he blinked

and met her eyes, she added, "At the moment. I take in strays sometimes, too."

Chinmae coughed and scrubbed his neck. "That's... nice." He pictured a loud, crowded home full of warmth and fur.

"They're my family. It's home," she said simply. The laughter faded as she thought of the motley crew waiting for her.

They fidgeted in the suddenly too-bright back room of the clinic.

"Well... I guess... you need to get going." Chinmae gestured to the street. "Come on. I'll walk with you."

Hana slid her hearing aids over the rims of her ears, pressing the rubber pieces into her ear canals. He waited until she freed her hair from the clips and shook it out, sending waves flying in all directions, before activating the alarm and locking up behind them.

They walked wordlessly down the street, side by side, until the glass doors of the pedestrian entrance to the parking garage appeared.

"Be safe driving, Hana."

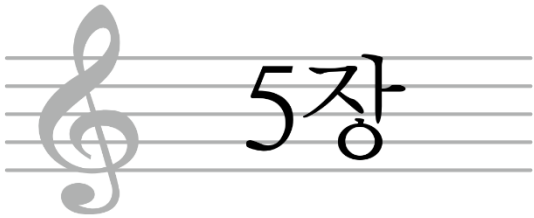
Her name—just Hana, not Dr. Kim—felt different in his hand as he signed it. Like an important weight between his fingers. He wasn't ready for her to go.

"Yes. Bye." Hana nodded. With one hand on the door, she turned and called out, "Chinmae…?" When he turned to look back, she paused. "Thanks. For tonight."

The corner of his mouth lifted, and he walked back to Campus, pulling his hat low over his forehead and a mask over his nose.

Chinmae had come to PetSeouls in a bad mood. Now he felt… disjointed. That, more than anything else, was the problem. He didn't know what he was supposed to feel.

He *did* feel her fingers on his arms. The cool ointment, now warm and dry against his skin, didn't even begin to capture Hana's touch.



Ara slept peacefully, not the pain-filled restlessness of life on the streets. It was the kind of deep sleep that energized her, fueling a tail-whipping frenzy during the busy daylight hours.

Hana loved the peaceful mornings at her clinic. No pressure. No demands. No extraneous sounds that made her head swirl. Just her and the animals.

She breathed in the comforting, warm scent of animal musk as she folded towels, then sat on a stool at one of the metal exam tables. She pulled off her hearing aids and clipped back her hair, readjusting the one strand that always fell forward and caught on an eyelash.

Methodically, she reviewed the charts of the other overnight guests besides Ara. She tapped the tablet propped against the file stack, replaying the night tech's voice-to-text memo on a tabby's fluid intake, and jotted the number down before moving to the next chart.

She had learned to work in this manner, with efficiency and restraint. It was how she'd survived her teens, how she'd made it through veterinary school.

She'd done this alone. Proven everyone wrong.

After Mom died and she started losing her hearing, Dad… left. Built a new family somewhere else. Built an easier life—without her. Once was enough to teach Hana the signs of people leaving. Hana slapped a file on the stack and pulled a new one closer. She caught movement in the corner and watched Ara lift her head and wriggle as best she could with her leg in a cast.

She can't stay here much longer, Hana thought. *Being cooped up in the cage overnight isn't right anymore.*

Going back to the street wasn't an option, and she didn't have the heart to put up adoption posters.

Hana signed to the puppy watching her. "Looks like you're coming with me. I hope you like brothers and sisters."

Then Chinmae won't have a reason to visit anymore. Things can go back to normal. All of this will… go away. That was good. It was what she wanted. Wasn't it?

He'd come often over the last few weeks, each time playing with Ara before helping Hana with menial chores, working easily beside her.

He learned without overstepping, never once questioning her competency. The times she caught him staring, not simply watching for a sign, rattled her. At each visit, each accidental brush of a hand as they worked together made her toes curl annoyingly in her clogs.

Five days ago, he barely looked up from feeding a litter of bunnies. "I'm leaving for a work thing tomorrow."

"Oh." Hana couldn't think of anything better to say.

"A few of us are filming some media content in a village down south for a few days." He hadn't expanded, and she hadn't asked. He walked her to the garage again and waved goodbye.

It had been days since she'd seen Chinmae. The clinic finally returned to its usual pleasant rhythm—predictable, manageable. Days she absolutely, thoroughly enjoyed. She didn't miss his quiet, distracting steadiness.

The magenta light over the door flashed a few times, and Hana glanced at the convex mirror that allowed her to see into the waiting room. Seeing her friend at the door, turning off the alarm, Hana set aside her work for the moment.

"Morning." Ji-Woo signed as she leaned against the doorframe to the back room. "You're early. Or you never left. Which one?"

"I left. And now I'm back." Hana shook her head from side to side, then raised a finger to stop the complaint she knew was coming. "I slept, ate, and cuddled with my family. A beautiful evening."

Ji-Woo snorted with a grin. "I'd rather cuddle with a man than a pack of crazy pets like you!"

Laughing at Hana's eye roll, Ji-Woo's face brightened. "Oh! Speaking of—I ran into your favorite guard this morning. IN7's back in town."

Hana paused. “Lee Min-Jae?”

“Mmm.” Ji-Woo smiled. “No screaming this time. We talked like adults.”

“Gad. Knowing you, that means—”

“Hey! I’m not that bad!”

“Yes, you are. He’s breathing and male. You’re interested.” Hana pinched her lips, trying to scowl—almost managing to hold back a laugh while her stomach twisted into a knot. *He’s back? Since when?*

Ji-Woo wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue. Then her gaze sharpened. “That means your friend is back, too. Has he come by yet?”

“He’s not my friend. And no, he hasn’t been here.” Hana turned back to her files, hoping Ji-Woo would drop it.

Her friend didn’t get the message. Ji-Woo signed when Hana finally looked up. “But he will, right? I mean, Ara’s still here.”

Hana rolled her shoulders, remembering the decision she’d just made. “Not for much longer. She’s ready to go.” She returned to her charts, then glanced at her friend again, who hadn’t moved from the doorway. Hana gritted her teeth, hating that worried frown.

“What about Chinmae?”

“I’ll tell him later, if he comes,” Hana finally answered. “Things will go back to normal then.” She spoke as if it were an afterthought.

Ji-Woo waited for Hana to look at her, but when

she didn't, she knocked on the metal table, letting her knuckles tap the smooth surface. Eventually, Hana's eyes met hers. "*If?* Of course, he will! And since when is normal a good thing? It's boring. Predictable—"

"Safe."

"Boring." Ji-Woo's quick comeback hung in the air. Her expression softened, and she sat on a stool. Reaching across the stack of files, she held her friend's hand, stopping Hana's nervous finger-tapping.

After a long few moments, Hana pulled her hand away. "Normal is what I've got. It's what's best. People leave, Ji-Woo. You know that. Not... Only you've stayed." Hana picked up her pen, watching it flip between her fingers a few times before setting it back down. "I'm too much work."

Ji-Woo knew *exactly* who Hana was comparing Chinmae to. She'd seen Mr. Kim's frustration in the dorm lounge. Seen him refuse to sign, barely even *try* to communicate with his daughter. Heard him mutter 'never mind,' when he turned away from Hana in disgust and strolled out for the last time. She'd seen that same annoyed look on the faces of clients, classmates, and acquaintances many times since. More than Hana knew.

Ji-Woo swallowed the memory and the familiar ache for her friend. That was the past. "Honey. Chinmae came. He stayed." Ji-Woo leaned closer. "Does that really sound like someone who thinks you're too much work?"

"It's just about Ara."

Ji-Woo sat back and glared at her friend. *You are so freaking stubborn—I want to strangle you!* "Why can't you even consider—"

"Because!" Hana's voice echoed across the room and reverberated in her head. "Because everyone gets tired of this!" She waved a frantic hand around her head. "The hearing aids, the accommodations..."

Tipping her head to the side, Ji-Woo studied her. "Has he ever?" Hana rested her forehead against one hand and stared blankly at the chart in front of her. *No. He hasn't. But…* Hana held that thought longer than she wanted to. *He will. Someday he will. And I don't want to see it happen. Better if he left now.*

Watching her friend hide, Ji-Woo huffed and tipped Hana's chin up to read her lips. "Fine. Be that way. But you need to wait before taking Ara home—at least until Chinmae visits. Don't be rude to him." She pulled back slowly, then quietly begged. "I wish you'd give Chinmae a chance. I really think he'll surprise you."

With that, she stood and walked to the lobby. A minute later, Hana saw the lobby lights turn on and Ji-Woo settling in at her desk.

She glared at Ara, and the puppy stared back. That penetrating, all-knowing gaze. That annoying tail thumping against the cage walls.

"Don't look at me like that. You don't understand."