



Kim Baebin pulled a large suitcase to the elevator, utterly exhausted and thrilled to finally be alone. It had been a long, punishing week. Physically, it had been rough, but mentally, he was overwhelmed with demands that pushed him to the limit. *I would kill for one brief moment to breathe and hear myself think!* Of course, his brain was stretched so thin, he didn't know if he could muster one coherent thought. This was one of those weeks when he definitely hated being team leader.

Not only did he have to worry about his own part in their K-pop group, Insatiable 7, or IN7 as they were generally known, but as the de facto "dad," it was his responsibility to take care of the other six members and make sure they stayed in line. He also acted as the go-between for his teammates, with their manager, and their recording label, South Korean Entertainment Corporation.

They were in a "transitional period" since winning the MAMA Artist of the Year Award. No longer newbies, they had to evolve and grow to keep their tenuous grip at the top. *Echos*, their fan group, wanted something different from their usual hip-hop style, and they needed to produce now or lose out on the next award cycle.

Bending to their fans' requests, last week, the group scrapped the entire routine for "Summer Crush" that they had been working on for a month in favor of a new, edgier dance. They also finished two recordings for the next album, which was due out in a few months.

He could tell their choreographer, Mr. Shu, and their teammate, Ko Kyong, the best dancer in the group, who also helped create their dances, were struggling to make the new changes. Everyone's frustration levels were rising between learning the new routine and maintaining their usual schedule of meetings, fan shows, and publicity sessions. They all needed a break.

This was supposed to be their downtime, the slowest part of the year. But the reality was, there was no downtime. *Ever.*

Baebin wished he could sleep for a month straight.

His mother was clamoring for a visit. It had been too long since her baby was home, but with the noisy, chaotic week he'd had, he couldn't stand any more togetherness. He needed to be alone in his new place.

"New" wasn't the right word. He bought the place six months ago, but had only been there a handful of times. It was safe to say the new apartment wasn't home. Yet. But he had high hopes. If only he had time to spend there with his crazy, busy, insane schedule, he could turn it into his oasis.

If only.

It was rare for someone in their early twenties to own an apartment in Seoul—particularly one this size and in this location. Four years of being a trainee—then a shooting superstar in the music industry—afforded Baebin this little luxury.

The overly long slog to make it onto the charts surprised everyone: the group, their families, and their fans. It should never have taken this long. Why they didn't quit—or SKEC didn't let them go years ago—still baffled him. He knew they were good. Very good. But every time they had their chance to debut, the door ultimately slammed in their faces. Year after year, time after time, destiny was denied. Until, *finally*, they got their chance.

Now they were “overnight stars,” and everyone wondered where they were all this time. As if they had intentionally gone unnoticed, living in the shadows, loving the misery of nothingness.

Long days and millions of headaches later, he managed to buy his dream home. Baebin loved his friends and teammates. They were the next best thing to his family. But living in such close quarters for so long while being their team leader and *hyung*, the eldest in the group, was draining and exhausting. He needed space and, finally, at twenty-four, he got it.

The eighteenth-floor apartment filled the entire southeast side of a skyscraper building just northwest of the Han River, overlooking city central. He was high enough that cars seemed like ants, and the noise wasn't noticeable. The views were amazing, day or night—mountains in the distance, tall buildings, shimmery pools of light from the bridges across the river, and the moving stream of taillights on the busy

roads that weaved everywhere in Seoul. It's hard to have privacy in such a big city, but from his perch above it all, the hum of busyness faded away like stars in the sky.

He waved and dipped his head to the middle-aged man who stood sentry at the lobby desk, protecting the doctors, CEOs, and other minor celebrities who lived in the building. Baebin wasn't sure what the diminutive, sweet man could do in the face of rabid fans, but he appreciated the kindness and dedication of all the building staff.

Minor gatekeepers though they were, the security was still a major selling feature and one of the reasons he bought the apartment. Baebin encountered this particular man maybe five times in six months, but the sharp-eyed elder recognized him instantly and waved him past with a welcoming smile as if he were a regular fixture in the building.

Punching in his door code, he let himself into the *hyeongwan*. The entryway of the apartment was supposed to be where you shucked off outside life and changed your shoes—the gateway to the peace and privacy of home.

His was empty.

Crap. My slippers. I took them to the dorm. Images of his bandmates flashed across his mind's eye. A *sinbaljang* would provide enough cubbies for everyone else to have slippers, too. And if it was low, it could be a shelf for keys.... He smiled. *I'll need one pair of slippers big enough for Yejoon's freakishly large feet.*

Baebin moved three steps inside, and already, he had a growing mental list of what he needed to buy. *Slippers, sinbaljang, umbrella stand...*

Kicking his shoes off into the corner, he stepped up into the open space. The massive living area with its tall ceilings, chandeliers, and plain white walls stared back at him. Bright afternoon spring sunlight streamed through the large bank of unprotected balcony windows, glinting off the weeks-old dust motes floating from the cardboard boxes in the empty space. The stale air reeked of mildew and the previous owner's grandma-esque perfume that still hadn't dissipated after all this time.

His happiness to finally be home was quickly replaced with a familiar, unpleasant weight again. The overwhelming task of turning this empty monster into something that suited him made his stomach churn. He really wanted a place of his own to escape work and the constant, never-ending swirl of activity. But he had neither the time, inclination, nor knowledge of how to do it.

Baebin didn't feel the warmth and carefree love of his parents' place. Or the serviceable mess of the dorm at the SKEC Campus, where he'd lived and trained with everyone since their days as trainees.

There was a stark difference here. His new personal life off-campus boiled down to a beautiful apartment, a ridiculously large pile of boxes, a few pieces of donated, mismatched furniture, and a piano.

He paid the previous owners nearly twice the instrument's worth to keep it, but the piano belonged

in the space. Currently, dust covered its glossy black surface, and piles of boxes surrounded it. The piano was unreachable and unused.

The boxes were an excellent goal for the long holiday weekend. It would be enough to keep his mind and body busy with something other than the group's latest mini album and production problems. He was reasonably sure his missing clothes and rice cooker were somewhere in the pile.

It was warm for May, and hazy remnants of the spring pollen still clung to the city, but Baebin opened the large sliding balcony doors and let in the fresh air. A stiff breeze gusted across the city and river, swooshing up the building to blow the dust inside his apartment into little tornados.

Even in stocking feet, his footsteps echoed as he passed the mess. His suitcase rattled loudly as he dragged it to the master bedroom, pausing along the way to toss his backpack, overflowing with sheet music, into the locked room guarding a new, state-of-the-art sound studio.

The studio was his only requirement, and a major renovation was needed before moving in. It took weeks to convert the interior bedroom with its ensuite bathroom into his dream. He'd fully stocked the newly soundproofed space with microphones, computers, and all the recording equipment he would ever need. Anything he could do at the Campus, he could do here.

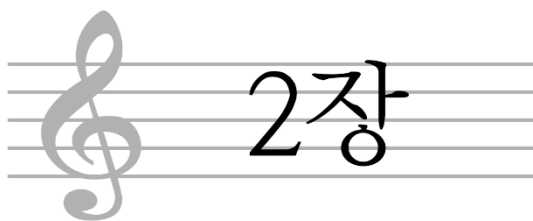
It was both a work in progress and the most complete room in the apartment. He was still missing storage compartments for office supplies and

kitchenette equipment. His personal IN7 memorabilia which he wanted to display in the room, lay somewhere in the boxes.

Laying his suitcase on the ground in his bedroom where the dresser should be, Baebin returned to the living room. He turned on the TV for company and opened a box. Several hours later, he found a few necessary items but no rice cooker. The sun was getting low, and he wanted air that didn't include decades-old dust.

And he needed food. There was nothing in the fridge. He had a few bags of instant ramen in the pantry, but other than that, it was empty, too. Food and drinks expanded his mental shopping list. He should have stopped before coming here.

Slippers, sinbaljang, umbrella stand, food, laundry soap, desk organizers, a coffee pot for the studio, hangers.... What else was I—oh! Patio chairs...



The same older man was still at the lobby desk. As Baebin approached, he read the nametag pinned to his jacket. Bak U-Jin. Bowing slightly at the waist, he begged for directions. Mildly surprised at the man's ability to expertly work Google Maps on his phone, Baebin was soon out the door, following the path to his destination.

Timing himself, he ran slowly up the steep hill, away from the river, keeping an eye on his phone to follow the twisting, winding streets of his sliver of the Dongbinggo-dong neighborhood that was a part of Seoul. Almost to his destination, he passed MinGo, the restaurant Mr. Bak recommended. It looked busy, and the delicious, spicy smells wafting through the open door made his stomach growl. Both were indications of a great meal.

The steep hill was different from the Campus's treadmills and the flat downtown streets he was used to. By the time he arrived, he was gasping for breath, and the backs of his thighs were burning.

Mr. Bak was right. The small outdoor fitness center was secluded, quiet, and perfect. Somewhat-new equipment sat scattered around, and the elevated view of the Han River and downtown were terrific.

City windows shimmered orange and pink in the setting sun, and lights across the bridges flickered on. The weights at the *sansjang* were lower than he was used to, so Baebin quickly cycled through each piece three times with minimal breaks.

An hour later, the sun disappeared. Taking a moment to cool down, he sat on a secluded bench farthest from the only streetlight in the area. It was a perfect spot to unwind from the long week. The city that shimmered with the warm light of sunset now sparkled like Christmas lights against the inky sky. Unwittingly, his mind drifted, and he contemplated his uncertain future while admiring the view below and all the people moving about in their own worlds.

Baebin wallowed in confusion and doubt. *I have to keep going. I have to do better. Be better. We won't get another chance like this. But all I've done is focus on today—what about tomorrow?*

His future should be easy. He kind of knew what he wanted. He wished for an entire life just like this last year with his teammates, but he knew it wouldn't happen. They had waited so long to get to the top. The MAMA award was great, but still, he felt unsettled. Already, the life ahead without IN7 weighed on him.

He had five years before mandatory enlistment. Less than five years left with the group as they stood now. Then what? *What will I do without the guys when this is all over? What can I possibly do alone?*

After everyone else cycled through their two-year military service after him, would IN7 still be together? *Will we disband then? Or will we already be has-*

beens? Every cycle of albums, tours, and award seasons brought him closer to happiness... and *finality*.

Shaking off the depressing thoughts that sprinted circles in his head, Baebin started back down the hill, stretching his shaking muscles. He was pleased with the discovery of the *sansjang* overlook. His stomach rumbled, responding to the pungent, fermented smell of *kimchi* stew

and spicy *buldak* from MinGo. Better than any neon sign, the savory, delicious aroma drew him inside.

The homey restaurant was as wide as it was deep, with a long counter separating the tables from large steaming vats of rice and soups and a window to the kitchen beyond. Even at this late hour, MinGo still buzzed with the conversations between families and friends from the many occupied tables in the small space.

Baebin planned on takeout until he noticed Bak U-Jin sitting alone at an empty table closest to the counter.

He hesitantly approached the older man, not wanting to disrupt his private dinner. "May I join you, Sir?"

Mr. Bak looked up, taken aback by the tall, younger man, but he graciously stood and offered the chair across from him.

The building staff knew Baebin "worked in music," but the finer details were left out. Intentionally. It didn't matter who lived there; their job was to guard

the building, not keep scorecards on which residents had more interesting lives... even though several had dreadful, eye-rolling reputations. But this young boy was polite, rarely there, and when he was, no one ever heard a sound from him. He had friends over a few times, and they were all just as large and kind as he was.

Mr. Bak chattered nervously with his unexpected company. "I'm glad you are giving this restaurant a try. You won't be disappointed. MinGo is special. The owner is, too. She has her own recipe for *buldak*. It's called 'fire chicken' for a reason! She's owned the place for years, since before her husband passed away, and now runs it with her two children. We have been friends for more years than I can count."

Baebin sensed his close bond with the family in Mr. Bak's gentle smile but also noticed his pink cheeks and wondered if he felt something more for the owner. "The equipment and view at the *sansjang* were perfect, and if the food here is half as good as it smells, I'm sure I'll love it."

They ordered from the boy who worked alone in the busy restaurant and continued chatting. "I'm new to the neighborhood, so if you have any other recommendations, I would be grateful," Baebin said.

Mr. Bak nodded, instinctively knowing what the young man needed. "I'll prepare a map for you—help you avoid the busier areas around here. There are some nice, quiet places you can visit." He noticed the boy's shoulders relax, even as he continually checked and adjusted the hat that covered his bright-red hair and avoided eye contact with the rest of the room.

Suddenly, the door crashed open, banging off the moss-green wall behind it. Baebin whipped around at the heart-stopping commotion, and his throat spasmed when he saw her.

She was too much to take in all at once. Overly tall, she was thin but well-rounded in all the right places. She had long, stick-straight hair that flew out behind her like a satin cape, an instrument case in her hand, and a reed in her mouth. It was overwhelming.

Spitting fire, she found who she was looking for and made a beeline for him, screaming and pulling the reed from between her lips to wave it like a baton. "Min-Jun! Hey! You brat!"

Mr. Bak chuckled quietly and whispered over the table to Baebin, "That's Choi Go-Ri. The older sister. MinGo was named after those two. They love each other, but oi! Can they fight!" Mr. Bak's thin face squished in a grimace of pure delight, watching over his shoulder as the two combatants squared off at the counter.

Min-Jun fiercely spouted back at his sister, "Wha—! Get out! Leave me alone!" Flicking the dripping soup ladle still in his hand, bits of pork, cabbage, and onion arched through the air, halting his sister's forward charge as she tried to avoid the flying *kimchi* stew. "Why couldn't you work last night? I had a study session!" Throwing the ladle back into the vat, he pointed to two bowls he had dished up and jerked his head to Baebin and Mr. Bak.

Go-Ri stuck the reed back in her mouth and stalked over to them. Her flowered skirt flowed around her calves, and her heaving chest fascinated Baebin.

He couldn't take his eyes off her. She thunked down their bowls and sloshed stew onto the table. When she got a whiff of Baebin, she wrinkled her nose and barely even acknowledged the family friend, who grinned at the young man's bewildered face.

Spinning back to her brother, she chased him around the counter, yelling, as he tried to retreat to the kitchen. "Study session, my butt! Don't lie to me—you skipped and stole my computer to play video games *again*! Do you know how much Omma pays for those extra classes?!"

"Oh, and you're not playing, too?" Min-Jun pointed to the case she dropped beside the counter. "You always leave Omma and me here so you can play at that stupid club! If you tell Omma I skipped class, I'll tell her you had students in here again this morning! You know she hates it when you teach in her office!"

"Aiech! You—! That's not the same! Where else am I going to teach right now? But you need those classes to get into University! Don't you *dare* skip again!" As quickly as she blew in, Go-Ri finished her tantrum, slammed her way out the door, and walked down the hill in a huff. None of the other patrons seemed shocked at the siblings' confrontation. They continued eating as if this were a common, everyday occurrence.

Min-Jun peeked through the kitchen window to look for his sister. With a long-suffering growl, he brought over rice, chicken, and beer to Mr. Bak and Baebin, slapping them on the table with as much force as his sister had.

"I skipped one study session, and it was like I caused the North to invade again! Mr. Bak, it's not fair! She's always off doing something, but I can't take a break? Why am I always the bad one?!" Not giving the elder a chance to answer, he huffed away to clean the soup splatters before they could leave red chili paste stains on the counter and floor.

Mr. Bak grinned at Baebin. "I don't know why he's surprised. Go-Ri lives for music. Everyone knows it. You should hear her play. I've never heard someone as talented as her." He nodded to himself in amazement and dug into his dinner.

"What does she play?"

"I think the shorter list is what she *can't* play; seems like she's mastered every instrument in Korea—maybe the world. She must be heading to *The Jazz Club* for a gig tonight."

Baebin would never tell his mother, but MinGo was better than one of her home-cooked meals. Chili peppers lit sparks in his mouth, but the unique blend of garlic, ginger, and rice syrup tempered the heat of the chicken. Baebin polished off the stew next, sopping up the remaining liquid with spoons of rice. After their meal and another beer, the two men companionably parted ways at the door.

The mini mart down the street was still open, and Baebin reviewed his shopping list. *Food... laundry soap (or was it dish soap?).... She's pretty. I wonder if Mr. Bak was just bragging about how well she could play....* Twenty minutes later, his hands full of shopping bags, Baebin pulled out his phone and texted his favorite bodyguard, Chu Kwan.

B: U BORED?

CK: OF COURSE

Chu Kwan chimed back instantly. He was young, single, and hated sitting still.

Within an hour, Baebin returned home to shower and change into his favorite comfortable jeans, a sock hat over his hair, and oversized black-framed glasses. Kwan picked him up outside the apartment, and they headed to The Jazz House.

Nervous energy rolled in his stomach, mixing with the undigested stew, as they drove the short distance to the tiny bar sandwiched in the middle of a busy block. *Good grief, what am I doing?* he thought. *I have better things to do, like sleep.*

The owner of the small, unassuming club met them at the back door. He bowed low several times, holding out his business card with two hands. He had never received a call from the Campus before and was anxious to learn about the two men coming to his club.

If he played this visit right, he could make a big profit. South Korean Entertainment Corporation was one of the largest entertainment companies in Korea, and visitors from SKEC meant he was finally getting noticed.

Mr. Shin walked them over to their table. It was tucked out of the way but had a clear view of the stage.

The second set had already started, and Choi

Go-Ri sat perched on the edge of a tall stool, playing the sax. One long leg stuck straight out, while the heel of the other shoe hooked on the top rung of the stool, hiking up her skirt enough to give Baebin a glimpse of toned calf. Eyes closed, foot twitching in time with the offbeat, her fingers seemed to melt over the keys. She pulled, drew, and urged each note effortlessly from the liquid melody.

The piece intrigued and tugged at Baebin's music-loving soul. He didn't know much about jazz but knew enough to recognize her talent immediately. The drummer and bass guitarist on stage with her were capable, but she earned the spotlight.

She was good. Better than the Kim Sisters from the '50s; better than BTS' first hit. He just couldn't seem to stop looking at her. She was even prettier now than she was at the restaurant.

Chu Kwan knew even less about jazz, but always got a kick out of the strange trips Baebin took him on. The two men dropped their designated protector/protectee roles almost as soon as they met two years ago. As Baebin's popularity grew, along with the need for Chu Kwan's protection, so did their friendship. Clandestine excursions while on tours and at home became their escape from the reality of working in entertainment.

The two men were the same size and could pass as twins, but that is where the similarity ended. Unlike Baebin, Chu Kwan could swing a guy over his shoulder in an instant, but couldn't even sing in the shower. Their easy camaraderie, which allowed their appreciation for each other to blossom without

demanding requirements or expectations, made them fast friends.

Both loved quirky, unique adventures and were always up for trying new things. As long as it was under the radar, it was a green light to them. From an art museum in France to a tuk-tuk ride in Thailand to a disco club in Berlin—which got a little hairy—of all the nighttime trips he had been on with Baebin, The Jazz Club was a new one for his diary.

The music was good, and the room filled fast. Chu Kwan kept busy for a while, judging and meticulously inspecting the crowd. It was an easy Friday night. The place was packed mostly with ladies drinking wine and a few guys puffing their chests with no hope for a hook-up—all out celebrating the end of a work week.

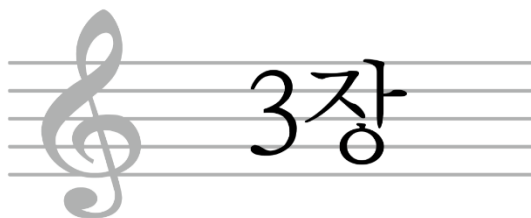
Baebin was left alone to ogle the long-legged, long-haired beauty rotating instruments on stage. She was just as talented on the keyboard and oboe as she effortlessly switched back and forth between songs and sometimes played more than one in the same piece.

After a final look around, Kwan sat back and turned to Baebin. Following the direction of his stare, Kwan snorted in amusement. *Mmm, that explains this trip.* The girl was the closest thing to his friend's type he'd seen in a while. Hot, tall, unpretentious, and a fabulous musician... even if it was jazz. He hid his smile and hollered over the din, "She's not bad."

Baebin made a throaty grunt, grabbed his cola, and sat back. The flush on his neck had nothing to do with the warmth of the room.

While watching the crowd around them, Kwan also kept an eye on his friend, as his friend kept an eye on the girl. Deciding to play nice, he withheld the male ribbing and left Baebin to drool in private. *This is going to be interesting*, he thought, grinning to himself.

Before the third set ended, Baebin and Chu Kwan slipped out the back door, unnoticed by anyone except the owner. Mr. Shin, disappointed at the cheap tab, hoped this wouldn't be the only visit to his club from the men.



Baebin woke to blinding sunlight punching holes into his brain. He didn't even drink at the bar last night. Either he needed to move to a new place that didn't face the rising sun or buy blackout curtains. The pillow he crammed over his face only made him stuffy, sweaty, and annoyed.

Giving up on sweet extra sleep, he changed his focus to his rumbling stomach.

There was food in the fridge now, but he only had one pot. This was also annoying. He had a lot of work to do today if he was going to stay here another night. On the verge of surrendering to his mother's whims, full meals, and his childhood room with more than a mattress on the floor, he took the new box of cereal and his bowl from yesterday to the living room floor to eat.

Baebin ran through his shopping list again in his mind until he felt his eyes cross. *Slippers... ~~food~~ got some—not enough... ~~dish~~ laundry soap—wrong one... desk organizers & coffee pot for studio... broom... hangers... umbrella stand...* It was too long. *It really doesn't matter*, he thought ruefully. He needed at least two of everything in the store, anyway. He dug out a notebook from his work bag

and began writing.

Lists and notes always helped clear his mind. The guys laughed at him for writing down the smallest details, but having things on paper gave him a screwy sense of controlled freedom. The cereal box was half gone before he finally felt full and had enough energy to move.

He started going through more boxes. Three hours later, he found clothes in a box labeled "books" and in another one from Mom, his favorite old blanket. Everything smelled musty, like old wet cardboard. He unpacked some small kitchen items and left them next to the sink with his breakfast bowl, ready to be cleaned.

He desperately wanted a nap, but with only a few days off, he didn't want to waste his free time sleeping. His two options were to continue unpacking or go shopping again. He needed to buy laundry soap if he wanted to use the blanket tonight, and he really wanted to cook dinner.

Shopping midday on a weekend at the giant box store wasn't his best idea. Several fans recognized him, and it was difficult to concentrate on his list. Still, he gave everyone who approached him his personal time and gentle, carefree, trademark smile.

In the open, Kim Baebin was Yong-ee. Initially, he created the stage name to insulate his family from his work, but as IN7's popularity grew, he appreciated the separation for himself. His second name was a light switch that kept his private and public lives separate.

Fans were his livelihood—the reason he worked so hard. The better he did for the fans, the more they appreciated him, and the more confident he felt in his ability to weather the hard times. It was a symbiotic relationship that he enjoyed. *Most of the time.* It came with the job.

He knew pictures of him pushing his overflowing cart—unwieldy with everything he could find in the kitchen aisle, pillows, soap, cleaning supplies, and more food—would be posted on the *Echos* fan group webpage before he even left the store. An idol shopping for a broom guaranteed a week's worth of comments. *As if stars didn't need a broom.*

After multiple trips with his apartment building's luggage cart, Baebin was finally able to unpack his new toys. Music blared and echoed through the rooms, energizing him again for the work ahead. He crammed everything he could in the dishwasher, loaded the washing machine, and returned to the pile.

The large, thin crates standing in the corner turned out to be, as expected, the pictures and paintings he collected over the last few years while on tour. Ripping the foreign shipping labels off, he tucked them into their frames and scattered them around the apartment, ready to be hung.

Having the pictures out cheered him up. The wild, eclectic array of colors and prints brightened the rooms and made him feel like he was finally getting somewhere. He added a hammer and nails to the ever-evolving list.

Progress slowed when he unearthed four heavy

boxes from the Campus. Unlocking the studio door, Baebin slowly unpacked his treasures along the wall. The stack of photos and album covers grew next to multiplying rows of trophies and awards. The pile of gifts and mementos from his friends and fans overflowed in the corner.

Baebin felt an almost disembodied interest in seeing what he'd mindlessly kept for no reason. *Turns out, something stuffed in a drawer years ago because you were too busy to throw it away can make you cry six years later.*

The dance card and bib number for his SKEC tryout and Chinmae's first notes to him before they became best friends in the group, along with a huge pile of IN7 concert tickets that Manager Kim saved for each of them over the years, moved Baebin to tears.

Tears turned to groans when a simple blue fabric strip peeked out from under a ratty rabbit headband caked in old makeup and hair gel. What they not-so-affectionately called the "Five Step Hell" almost tore the group apart. It was a rollercoaster night of stress, exhaustion, pain, and emotions.

Almost a year of training had dissolved into bickering attitudes of superiority. Their lead choreographer and dance trainer, finally out of patience, turned into the worst drill sergeant this side of the DMZ.

Baebin had intentionally forgotten that traumatic night.

With ribbons tied to their legs and arms, their choreographer ordered them to spend hours

repeating the same five steps over and over *and over* again, without a break, until the seven talented individuals became one singular unit.

The bond to murder their choreographer transformed them into the most in-sync, well-matched, fluid group in the K-pop industry. But all that was second to the respect and admiration they learned for each other by surviving the breakdown together.

IN7 made it through that night, and before they crashed in their beds, they were forever bonded as friends.

If it weren't for the blue ribbon, they would never have won MAMA. Draping the strip of fabric over the large gold trophy, Baebin gave up unpacking and ran to the *sansjang*.

Beating yesterday's time, he skipped the equipment and sat on his favorite bench overlooking the city.

He looked out over Seoul. Thinking about the memorabilia he'd unearthed, his thoughts shifted from days gone by to what lay ahead. Each of the city lights below seemed to embody an idea, a suggestion, or a path toward his future. Ribbon. Ribbon and trophy. Ribbon, trophy, and his studio. Ribbon, trophy, and his *future*. As the string of lights stretched into the distance, he couldn't tell which was the brightest—the *right* light.

Just like last night, his thoughts spiraled. *What am I going to do next? What am I going to do without my friends? I know they look up to me, but I'm nothing*

without them. I don't want all this to end.

Growling at himself, Baebin threw his hat down and yanked at his hair. *STOP with this pity-party! Wallowing doesn't get you anywhere! Just focus and think!* Snatching up the hat, he stalked down the hill.

The battle inside his skull fizzled as he slowed to a halt outside of MinGo. He really wanted to cook for himself tonight, but he couldn't get over the tantalizing, mouth-watering smell. *It's all about the food*, he told himself.

He knew it wasn't.

What would she be like today? Was she working? Just one peek to feed his curiosity. MinGo was crowded again, but he only saw Min-Jun clearing tables while an older lady, who must have been his mom, cooked in the kitchen. Not only did they have the same cheeky personality and physical build, but they shared the same almond eyes.

Did Choi Go-Ri have the same eyes as well? He had seen her twice, but he didn't know the shape of her eyes. She hadn't looked at him. Disappointed, Baebin hid in the corner, quietly looking around as Min-Jun packed his order to go.

Passing the convenience store next door, his heart skipped. *She works here, too? How many jobs does she have? The restaurant, the store, and playing at the club—does she make any time for herself?*

He stood gawking at her through the windows, watching Go-Ri stock a shelf while listening to her earbuds. Multiple pencils stuck out from her twisted

knot of hair, exposing a long, slender neck that he itched to touch.

He sniffed his shirt, praying he didn't smell as bad as yesterday, before slipping inside the store. She bagged his drinks, took his money, and returned to stocking, never looking at him.

Long after his heart rate returned to normal, he continued to think about Go-Ri.



The rest of the holiday flew by in a blur of monotony. Whittling away at the boxes was his priority, but Baebin made time every day to visit the *sansjang* and often stopped for food on the way home. He tried other places, but nothing so far measured up to MinGo.

After begging Mom for her recipes, he officially used his new kitchen for the first time. His tablet sat propped up on the counter, covered in fingerprints of caked chili powder, soybean paste, and oil splatters. His first meal needed improvement, but was pleasantly edible.

Celebrating with a cheap bottle of convenience-store red wine, he polished off the whole meal in front of the TV.

Go-Ri worked every night, either at the restaurant or the store, and he always saw her with earbuds in or reading a book. He grew more intrigued every time he saw her. It wasn't just her gorgeous hair, curvy body hidden under flowing skirts and loose tops, or her musical talent that sucked him in; there was something strange about her. Tantalizing. Interesting. Fascinating. She was getting under his skin.

Watching, almost to the point of stalking, he noted she appeared friendly and even feisty with her brother at times, but her energy coiled tightly under strict control. Her lips never fully widened or relaxed. The palpable barrier around her shouted, "Stay away!" But just once, he wished to see Choi Go-Ri truly smile. He desperately wondered what color her eyes were.

He wasn't bothered by the fact that she didn't know who he was. He didn't expect everyone in Korea to fall on their knees before him. But she never even *noticed* him, even as a normal man. They never had a conversation beyond, "Will that be all?" Her attention never strayed further north than his shoulders. *Hello...! Just look at me. Just once!*

Baebin was so flustered, he didn't know what to do. *Good god. I'm twenty-four! This is worse than puberty! If I can talk to the girls in UNI and Sugar Cube at work, I can say hi to Choi Go-Ri!*

He spent the last morning of his vacation working out at the *sansjang* as the sun rose over the city. Sitting on the stone wall to cool off, Baebin let his thoughts wander. It would be a while before he could return here.

It surprised him that he was already sad to go. Just last week, he was ambivalent about being at the apartment and almost left it to escape to his parents' home. With IN7's upcoming schedule, it would be at least a week before he could come back.

And see Go-Ri again.

Most of the guys would be coming by tonight to

reconnect before work started again in the sound studio and on the dance routine for "Summer Crush."

Only two of them had their own places so far, and his was the newest and closest to the Campus. The apartment was far from finished, but a week's worth of work made a huge difference. The cold, boring apartment was coming to life.

The lights were still off at MinGo, but the door was open, and Baebin could see Go-Ri working inside.

Horrible screeching that no one could ever confuse with music, but possibly emanating from a clarinet, sounded from the back room, and she reprimanded the player as she started up the grill.

Noticing him in the doorway, she gave a slight bow before waving him in and calling a halt to the ear-piercing noise. Baebin grinned to himself. *She snuck her student in for a music lesson again. I wonder if her brother knows.*

Baebin's large delivery order for the evening received a raised eyebrow, and it was only after he paid that he remembered to buy water for the walk home.

She gestured to the cooler and took off to the back room, grimacing and yelling at her student as he started honking once more.

Yet again, she didn't notice me, he thought. If I can perform for thousands at concerts, I should have the guts to say hello without sounding like an idiot. Go-Ri had already forgotten about him as the lesson continued; there was nothing left to do but take the

free water and go. He missed his chance. *Again.*

After cleaning the best he could, he was ready with drinks and snacks when he heard his door code beep. Tae-Si, Kyong, Daeho, and Chinmae came in, and shoes and bags quickly littered the floor of the *hyeongwan*. Yejoon was coming later after his radio show, and Jaemin was staying behind one extra day with his family in Busan. *Crap. I forgot to get slippers.*

Tae-Si made a beeline for the gaming system and commandeered one of the few spots on the couch. Others sat sprawled on pillows on the living room floor or at the counter, inhaling the food Baebin set out. The rooms that just hours ago were lonely now rang with music and shouts of laughter.

Time sped by as the latest updates on family life and tales of greatly exaggerated home dramas swirled from one friend to another. All seven of them had close, loving families except for Chinmae, the *maknae*, or baby, of the group.

His friend was tight-lipped, and what little he'd shared of his childhood over the last six years was dreadful. His life was the classic melodramatic child-actor abuse story that was too crazy to be believed. But Baebin had seen the scars to prove it. Chinmae escaped when he got the chance to become a SKEC trainee. He was one of the few who actually liked the seclusion of the dorms.

Alcohol fueled their stories, weaving new ones with long-ago events from their trainee days until their cheeks and sides hurt. Daeho's comedy show recount of his two sisters fighting over a shirt before their dates had them rolling on the floor, while Kyong

and Tae-Si took turns arguing over who was at fault for losing the video game. Chinmae, for the most part, sat on the counter, laughing at everyone else while hoarding an entire tray of apple slices.

Rarely did the guys spend so much time apart, so the mini reunion off-campus, just hanging out and not working, was refreshing.

The intercom rang over the din, and Baebin had to shush his friends to hear. Mr. Bak's voice came through the speaker. "Your order from MinGo is here. I'm sending her up now."

About time! He glanced over at the kitchen, where he could hear Daeho rifling through his pantry. *I'm already out of snacks, and Daeho's going to find my ramen.*

Wait, her? Choi Go-Ri is here? Instantly, Baebin had a terrible idea.

Dumping a trash can full of empty bottles and cans on the piano, he begged Kyong and Tae-Si to play along with his practical joke. Kyong lay sprawled on top like a cabaret singer with Tae-Si ready to start one of their popular old songs just in time for the doorbell to ring.

Baebin's heart raced, and he chewed on the corner of his lip when he answered the door. She was so pretty. Her salmon-colored top brought out the tiny pink flowers scattered among the large blue ones on the skirt she wore the first night at the club. Half her hair was twisted in a tight up-knot, sharply defining her features while highlighting its glossy length.

"Come in. It will be easier to put it all in the kitchen." Stepping through the doorway, he reached out to help carry the heavy metal delivery container, but Choi Go-Ri pulled away sharply out of reach, her blank gaze never leaving his Adam's apple.

Agonizing seconds passed as she debated what to do. Grudgingly, she followed him into the kitchen to unload the cartons and rice boxes just as Tae-Si started pounding away at the piano. Go-Ri recoiled from the sudden raucous music and sucked in a breath.

Her whole body shivered and clenched tightly as she searched frantically for the source of the painful noise. Baebin could see her visceral reaction, as if an invisible monster had suddenly appeared in the room, tracing evil tentacles up her spine.

Instantly, he realized his stupid idea was worse than he thought. This wasn't what he planned. She was supposed to be amused, not disgusted and enraged.

The music was beyond awful. Already afraid of being inside the strange apartment, and then the banging combined with the disrespect for the gorgeous Steinway, covered in trash, and the two clowns treating it like a toy, infuriated her beyond all sane reasoning. She snapped. Anger overruled all coherent thought. Her pale nervousness turned pink and then fire-red with fury, her voice rising with every word and ending in a screech as she laid into them. "Stop! Stop it! Get off! Don't do that! How dare you treat an instrument like that! Why would you—"

Daeho poked his head out of the pantry, and the

noise from the piano halted as five men gaped at her. She slapped a hand over her mouth, cutting off the tantrum that now echoed in the space.

In the deafening silence that followed, Go-Ri's eyes traveled to each man before locking onto Baebin.

For the first time, she *really* looked at him. Black pupils replaced the warm chocolate eyes, and tears threatened to form before she managed to grab the last sliver of herself and yank it back behind her top-secret shutters.

"I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—please don't tell!" Choi Go-Ri unceremoniously dumped the food onto the counter and, hugging the metal container tightly, she retreated with a last peek at the men around her and the piano.

Go-Ri ran to the *hyeongwan* and barreled headlong into a hard body.

A whoosh of air escaped Yejoon as he lunged out to stabilize both her and the container.

Flinching, she shrieked in fright, snatched the container back, tripped over shoes and bags, and ran out the door.

Everyone stayed frozen, staring at their *hyung* and the doorway where the girl disappeared. Yejoon stood in the entry, rubbing his bruised belly, his jaw hanging to his knees. "What did I miss?" he finally managed to ask as he walked into the room.

"Who's the weirdo?" Daeho quizzed as he

abandoned his search for ramen in the pantry and joined the group.

"Takes one to know one. And don't call her that," Baebin retorted sharply, grabbing a rag and the trash can. He cleaned the piano in two wide swipes, pushing Kyong onto the floor, his backside narrowly missing boxes. "She's from the restaurant nearby. I've seen her around a few times." Baebin flopped onto the bench next to Tae-Si, smacking the keys with his forehead in a painfully dissonant chord.

"I don't think she liked Kyong's singing!" Tae-Si laughed as he rubbed *hyung's* head, sending it banging against the keys.

"Dude, stuff it! She couldn't hear me over your lousy playing!" Kyong countered as he picked himself up off the floor before turning to *hyung*. "So, what was up with the joke? It was for her right, not Yejoon?"

Everyone gathered around the piano, eyeballing him expectantly for more details, except Chinmae. He stood alone, resting a hip on the bookcase, arms crossed and eerily silent as he watched his friend. The glower that shimmered in his icy stare made Baebin regret the entire event more than Choi Go-Ri's outburst.

Yeah, why did I do that? That was the stupidest thing he had ever done. He wasn't in elementary school anymore, but he'd just pulled a girl's pigtails. I just wanted her to notice me, to look at me. Well, she looked at him, all right. God, I'm an idiot. "I don't know. I thought she would laugh. I haven't seen her laugh." I even sound like an idiot!

"She doesn't laugh? She really is a weirdo!" Daeho held up his hands, swiftly retreating from *hyung's* warning glare. "Sorry, not a weirdo. I meant to say... unique."

That wasn't any better, but Baebin let it go.

"Annnd? What else? She's hot. You like her?" Kyong wiggled his eyebrows, making kissy faces that sent the others cackling.

Baebin knew they wouldn't let it go, no matter how he answered. The bloom of embarrassment spread up Baebin's neck. "Mmm. Yeah. I like her."

"Sooo? You gonna ask her out?" Tae-Si grinned. "You know, we need to vet your dates. We can't let just anyone take you away from us."

"Maybe. I'd like to. I gotta get her to look at me first." His friends howled with laughter, making his ears turn red. *Ugh. Think before you open your mouth, you moron!* Chinmae was still glowering at him, the rest were teasing him, and he was regretting everything.

"I don't think she knows who we are," Yejoon mused, once he was able to settle down and stop laughing. "That's a good sign. She didn't seem like a wacko fan faking it to get close."

"Mmm. Yeah. She's not. But it's more than that. I can't explain it. She's different. It's not just her looks or her personality that interests me. I also found out she's a crazy talented musician. I mean, award-winning great. She teaches in the mornings at the restaurant, and I've seen her play at a jazz club over in the next neighborhood. She's unbelievable."

"Whoa, seriously!?" Those around the piano talked over each other, giving him dating advice.

As if they even knew how to date. The few high school crushes or the clandestine outings several of them had since they'd debuted didn't count. Even so, their advice was freely given and widely discussed.

As everyone headed to the kitchen and started cleaning up the pile of spilled food, Chinmae detoured and stuffed his feet back in his shoes. "I'm tired. I'll head out now."

Name-calling and whines ensued, but Chinmae only spared one last cool glance at Baebin before the door shut behind him. *This isn't over.*

Go-Ri flew past the desk and Mr. Bak, leaving him calling after her in confusion. The sudden burst of anger had receded, leaving her shaking and nauseous. Yelling at her brother was one thing, but for a moment, she had forgotten her carefully constructed wall.

Not only could she have been hurt, but now the reputation of her mom's restaurant could be, as well.

The metal container clattered to the ground next to the scooter as she crouched down, hugging her knees and trying to fill her shriveled lungs with air to clear away the dark spots that floated in her vision.

How could I have been so stupid? Never on deliveries do I go inside! No talking. Keep a safe

distance... That man who kept coming around this week made her forget her rules. He was so big and quiet; he made her shiver. I didn't even see the others until that horrid music played! How could I have done that?! Don't I know better? Stupid. Stupid. Stupid!

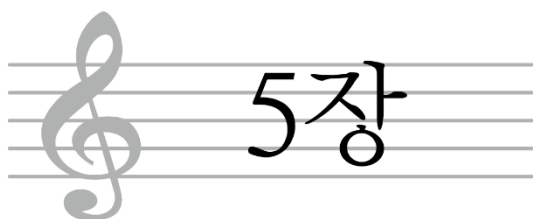
Never again. Stay away from him! Remember... don't let him—oh, I hate deliveries! She needed to strengthen her defenses. She needed to remember who she was now. She needed... needed. Scrubbing the heels of her palms into her eye sockets. Breathe Choi Go-Ri. You're okay. Breathe. In and out... She didn't stand until the buzzing in her ears dropped to nothing more than a hum.

Swiping away the mascara she'd smeared everywhere and squeezing the helmet on over her topknot, Go-Ri lashed the container to the scooter, just behind her sax, and eased into traffic. She was going to be late for the gig at The Jazz Club.

Chinmae watched as she pulled away before climbing into his taxi. She had left long before he did, and he was surprised to see her still there, hunched over on the curb. He felt the shivers as they raced through her. He let out the breath he'd been holding when she stood and collected herself.

The moment he saw her in the doorway, Chinmae felt the delivery girl's anxiety and carefully studied her as she was drawn deeper into the apartment. When the girl turned into a banshee, it startled him as much as the rest, but he felt something else. It wasn't just anger. In that quick moment before she retreated, he saw through her window, and he recognized the familiar reflexive emotion that he'd experienced since childhood. The reaction born from

pain and trauma. *Hyung, what were you thinking?*
That was a terrible mistake. You have no idea what
you've done.



The next morning, everyone sprawled on the dance floor at the Campus, trying their best to stretch and sober up. Chinmae looked at Baebin and jerked his head towards the door.

The hall hummed with people moving about, starting their morning training sessions. Each time a door opened, a burst of music echoed across the linoleum, only to be cut short with a *clack* as the door closed again.

Chinmae paced for a moment, his fists in the pockets of his joggers, pulling his baggy pants down. All night, he thought about how to confront his friend, but he was still afraid of crossing the line.

Baebin waited for the tongue-lashing that was coming. Rarely did Chinmae speak his mind. When he did, everyone knew it was only after deep consideration—and it was usually well deserved. Baebin huddled within himself, ashamed.

Chinmae stared at a dirt spot on the wall just over *hyung's* shoulder and stepped closer so his deep voice wouldn't carry in the busy space. "What were you thinking last night? It may have been funny to you, but obviously not to her."

Baebin whispered back, timbre low and shaking. "I don't know either. It was stupid. I just..." *Just what?* Wanted to see her react, see *something* from her? *Why did I do it?* "I just wondered what she would do." Baebin stared at his shoes and pulled his hoodie tighter over his head to protect his body heat from the cold drafts of the hall... and hide his face from his friend.

"You kidding me? Are you twelve? You brought a strange girl alone into the room with five of us to *test her*? Do you know how wrong that was—on so many levels?" Chinmae was slowly working himself into a lather. His glare flicked back and forth from the wall to his friend. "Not just for us and our reputation if she cries fowl, but for her own safety and protection? We wouldn't do anything, but how was she supposed to know that?"

Chinmae continued to stare at the spot on the wall—presumably a dead bug that had been squished decades ago—trying to hold back his anger. "She wasn't just upset. She was scared. She was afraid before she even came in. Who knows what your stupid stunt did to her? You're an idiot. I don't know what your game is, but when, *not if*, it falls apart, it won't end well. For either of you. Don't make the rest of us clean up your mess." Chinmae glared at his *hyung*, poking a finger into his chest. "You need to apologize and fix it."

He left Baebin standing alone in the hall as he stomped back inside. For the rest of the week, Chinmae avoided him at all costs.

Baebin rushed back to the apartment the first chance he had. On the way, he called MinGo for

delivery but was disappointed to see Min-Jun instead of Go-Ri with his order.

Glowering and shoving the food at Baebin, Min-Jun said, "I don't know what you did, but *noona* has refused to deliver here again. You don't know her, so I'm warning you: don't mess with my sister." He walked away without another word.

Baebin was already in a foul mood from getting reprimanded by Chinmae and had hoped to put an end to this mess tonight. The food sat untouched on the counter while Baebin changed into pajamas, pulled beers out of the fridge, and slept on the couch for two days, uncertain how to fix his mistake.

The upcoming Japan trip was the dress rehearsal for their long-awaited debut tour in the United States at the end of the following month.

If they weren't recording or dancing in preparation for it, they were promoting it through TV shows and fan events. Most of the time, they worked together as a unit, but sometimes, they split up for "surprise appearances" around Seoul and the surrounding towns.

Their latest mini album, *Insatiably More*, released a few months ago, and already has several songs on the music charts. It took endless meetings to arrange their new concert setlist. Their new show meant adjusting the routines, costumes, and stage design. It was a lot of behind-the-scenes work for everyone at the Campus—and in a short timeframe—but the puzzle was finally coming together.

All that remained now was running through everything until it became muscle memory. They were leaving for Japan in eight days.

Baebin had been home here and there for time alone, but he no longer had long weekends free. Forward progress at the apartment ground to a halt, and he hadn't touched the remaining boxes in weeks. The mid-summer heat baked the apartment and opening the sliding doors didn't help. At least the funky mildew cardboard smell was finally dissipating.

The trips were an excuse to see Go-Ri. The nights he found her at MinGo, she avoided him. At the convenience store, she wouldn't even ask, "Anything else?" Her barrier was even colder and higher than before.

She barely acknowledged him when he stopped by for water in the mornings. Baebin desperately wanted to talk to her and apologize, but every time he came in, she would just point to the cooler and retreat to her work, doing double duty opening the restaurant and teaching her students.

Her morning lessons intrigued him. Over the last two months, Baebin could pick out a few of the students and followed their progress as they improved. The eclectic mix of modern orchestra and traditional Korean instruments was as wide as the age and talent range of the students. *How many instruments can she play? Mr. Bak wasn't lying when he said the list was long.*

Gradually, Go-Ri stopped scowling at him; she was back to her usual, distant self. He was half-tempted to get a new tattoo on his neck, just for

her—an arrow saying, “Look up.”

Unsettled, Baebin still hadn't figured out what to do. *It should be so simple. Just apologize, introduce yourself formally, and get it over with.* The longer he waited, the harder it was.

Leaving a few won on the counter, he walked out each time without saying a word.

Mr. Bak sat at the desk well past his usual shift, and Baebin made a detour to chat with the elderly man. Since their first meal together, the two had formed a bond. It was their new habit to eat together when possible, and often Baebin would walk the shy, lonely widower home afterward.

It was the only bright spot in his infrequent visits home. Chatting with Mr. Bak late into the night, after a grueling few days, gave him peace. Comfort. The elder had become a friend and confidant. He helped Baebin get his head on straight, like the feeling he got making lists and notes. Mr. Bak gave him a sense of controlling freedom.

“Go-Ri is playing solo tonight. She tells me it will be music that she wrote herself.” Mr. Bak's quiet voice rang out through the empty lobby behind Baebin as he pushed the elevator button to go upstairs.

The doors opened. Then shut. Mr. Bak didn't bother hiding his grin as he watched the young man wrestle with himself outside the elevator. Baebin turned and huffed back past the desk, wrinkling his nose at Bak U-Jin, who just laughed and waved him

away.

I'm being ridiculous. Why am I so fixated on this girl who doesn't even know I'm alive? This is infuriating. Baebin wanted to slap himself.

It was the middle of the week, and the bar was barely half full. The AC provided a refreshing change from the humid heat outside but did nothing to dispel the odor of spilled beer that always seemed to permeate bars and clubs. Businessmen on their second—or third—round at an after-work party formed the largest and rowdiest group. Bottles littered their tables as the drunk men shouted over each other and milled about in the small space. The whole atmosphere made Baebin's skin crawl.

He quietly wandered to the end of the bar closest to the stage and found a seat away from everyone else. Despite trying to remain a small, nonexistent,

unremarkable, insignificant mouse, the bartender spotted the new regular right away and opened a bottle of cola.

After sliding it over, the young man in a vest and tie finished washing a few glasses and cleaned the workstation.

He knew who the customer was; his sister was a huge *Echos* groupie with IN7 posters plastered all over her walls. He was surprised that a pop idol had become a recent visitor to such a small, odd place like *The Jazz Club*.

The loud, drunk men called out for more soju and whiskey, but the bartender only waved to them. "I've

been slowing them down for the last hour. I can't wait for them to leave."

"Are they going to be a problem for you?" Baebin worried the group was too difficult for the bartender to handle alone.

"I hope not." He looked over Baebin's shoulder at the group, keeping an eye on them, especially the loudest table. "They won't recognize you, Yong-ee. Just keep your hat on and face away from them." The bartender winked at him and grinned. Pointing to Baebin's hair, he asked, "You changed the color. New show?"

Baebin's eyes widened briefly before he nodded, adjusting the hat. The chances of being recognized and treated like a human were one in a thousand. "Time for a change. And please, call me Kim Baebin."

The bartender dipped his head in acknowledgement. "No friend tonight?"

"Mmm. He's busy, and jazz isn't his thing. He just comes to keep me company." Chu Kwan accompanied him a few times for fun off the clock, but Baebin knew his friend was just being nice. The small club was too dull for him. The radio cut out, along with their talk, as music started onstage. Baebin turned to watch.

She sat alone, wearing jeans that hugged her round backside and slender legs. As usual, a heel of one shoe was caught in the top rung of the stool. The soulful, breathy sound of her sax wove around a prerecorded soundtrack that played over the speakers. Wispy fly-aways fell along her face and

neck from the soft bun at the back of her head.

The way she swayed to the melody with her eyes closed bewitched him. Even if no one else in the room noticed her talent, he did. He *drowned* in it.

I could listen to her all day. She should have an album. Baebin innocently questioned Mr. Bak about Go-Ri's music during dinner one night, but the sharp man picked up on his interest, and he backed off. *She needed to be in a studio recording, not in a small club with no one but me paying attention.*

Between the incredible artistry of her music and watching Go-Ri get lost in her own world, Baebin only desired her more. Wrapped up with her inside the swell of the sound, she took him through skies of pink, waves of deep, glassy blue, and dark, soulful nights. Each song was a ride exposing a sometimes-playful, sometimes-painful emotion deep in his consciousness.

Baebin's music was based on beat and words. The notes and melody mattered, but listeners remembered the words and the emotion of the stories IN7 told. It was about grabbing attention and pushing an idea.

He'd always had an appreciation for jazz, but Choi Go-Ri made it come alive. The quirky rhythm, the offbeat that emphasized an unexpected feeling. There never seemed to be a repeating chorus, just a continuation of the story, one chapter to the next.

It was a refreshing change from what he lived with day-to-day. It reminded him of why he liked music to begin with. It was the emotion, the complexity, and the thrill that one song can emit and

change daily for each listener.

Go-Ri's music excited him.

The disturbing clatter of overturned chairs and angry shouts snapped his attention back to reality. As he feared, the noise level at the tables grew, and a fight broke out before the barman could stop it. Pushing and shoving, two angry drunks staggered about before drifting toward the stage—and Go-Ri.

She sat frozen in fear, her background music playing alone like an eerie soundtrack to a movie. Helpless, she watched as chairs tumbled and the growing group swirled her way, one table closer at a time.

Others worked to separate and calm the combatants, but Baebin's only concern was Go-Ri and her growing look of terror with each passing second.

Chu Kwan should've come tonight! What do I do? She's going to get hurt if she doesn't move...! At the last moment, Baebin leaped onstage, knocking her off the stool as he wrapped her in a bear hug and lifted her in his arms. The cord around her neck snapped, and the sax banged to the ground, forgotten under trampling feet.

Baebin ran, carrying her through the tiny, empty kitchen and out the back door.

Momentum hurled him through the parking lot to his car, and he pressed her against its side. His weight held her off the ground for a small eternity before he thought to loosen his grip. He spun around, keeping

her in his arms, and leaned against the door, his head thrown back toward the car's roof in a daze from the sudden rush of adrenaline.

For a moment, Go-Ri leaned into him, panting. Then, she splintered. Turning into a furious wildcat, she fought his hold, struggling, pushing, and clawing against him. Finally, Go-Ri stumbled backward as she shoved Baebin away. A loud wail tore through her, and she jerked up her bare foot, almost catching him in the groin.

Snatching her up again, he tossed her onto the hood of the car while blocking her attack. Instinctively, he jumped out of reach and raised his palms in surrender. He only meant to help, but she was hyperventilating, clearly in the middle of a panic attack.

Staring blindly at him, she shielded herself and broke down in gut-wrenching sobs.

One shoe was missing, her shirt was in disarray, and the bun had come apart, sending hair flying in all directions down her back and in her face. Gently shushing her, he edged close enough to brush her hair off her wet cheeks and tuck it behind her ear. A large, bright-red welt from the saxophone strap marked her neck, the swelling visible in the dull streetlight.

Concern creased his brow as the back of his fingertips gently traced the swollen ridge. Go-Ri reared in terror. A fresh screech ripped out of her as she started flailing her knees and elbows, desperate to escape his touch.

Baebin yanked back, startled, and his hat, already askew, flew off, exposing his now purple-streaked white hair.

She scrambled across the hood of the car, her chocolate eyes wide and glassy with shock. Black spots blurred her swimming vision as flashes of faces swam in her mind. Unable to separate tonight from the memories of her past, her world folded in like paper origami, and Go-Ri slumped over.

Wh-what the hell? She wasn't moving. Her loud screams cut off the moment she fell over, and now his ears throbbed with only the sound of his heartbeat. Baebin crept close enough to confirm she was breathing before pacing about, trying to calm down and understand what had just happened.

She lay helpless and exposed on the hood of his car. *I can't leave her. What am I supposed to do now?*

Praying she didn't wake up and fight him again, he cradled her in his arms and carefully settled her in the front seat, covering her with a jacket he found in the back. Baebin knelt outside her open door for a long time, debating his next moves.

Baebin parked outside the gate of the tiny house behind the restaurant that Mr. Bak pointed out weeks ago and turned off the engine.

The dim streetlight reflected in the slight sheen of sweat on her forehead, and the dried rivers of old tears lacing her cheeks. Snuggled under his jacket,

her breathing seemed regular, and her coloring finally returned to normal.

Baebin lowered his seat to match hers and gently held her hand. Just as he started to doze off, she stirred.

Holding perfectly still, her eyes flicked around the dark interior of the car, then settled on him, unblinking for several long moments. The warm, solid weight of the fabric around her didn't bind or restrict her; it protected her. Shielded her. Her fingers stroked the linen lining inside while her chin rubbed against the twill collar. "You?"

"Mmm."

"Your hair... not red?"

"No. I changed it."

"You were there? Why?"

"To hear you play. You're amazing."

Memories creased her forehead. "You've been there before."

"Mmm." He was surprised she knew. *Had she seen me?*

There was a long pause as she chewed her lip, trying to arrange the slivers in her mind. The incongruous mix of woodsy cologne and, maybe, lavender hand lotion blended with the scent of his own body and gently permeated the warmth of the

material around her. It calmed her, re-structuring her disoriented nerves. "What's your name?"

"I'm Kim Baebin."

Dreading to leave the unfamiliar cocoon, she forced herself to push away the coat and reach for the door handle. "Thank you." She gave a soft, mewling cry when her bare foot touched the pavement, but she stepped out anyway, shutting the door quietly.

She staggered inside the gate. She was sick the moment it shut behind her and barely made it to her room before passing out again.

Thus ends the longest conversation to date,
Baebin thought as the gate clanked behind her. *A dozen, or maybe two dozen, words.*

He watched her leave before screwing his eyes shut and throwing a forearm over his head. What was supposed to be a simple, quick trip to the bar for some music and a smidge of ogling turned into a nightmare.

He hadn't the foggiest idea what caused her to react like that tonight, but it was insane. Worse than when she had exploded at his apartment weeks ago. Her instinctive, involuntary response drilled through him, hitting every nerve and twisting inside him. Nothing made sense, except that she was afraid. Of what, he did not know, but her fear bothered him.

Eventually, he sat up and called the Campus Help Desk. SKEC had one specific department to help its on-site residents. Their duties ranged from buying

takeout, returning bras, and bringing home drunks at night to, apparently, picking up scooters (without keys) and finding broken instruments and missing shoes, purses, and hats.

They must have entertaining stories to tell at holiday parties. Baebin hated calling, but he needed help, and for the first time, he allowed his star rank to get it.

Two hours later, he waved goodbye to the guys dropping off Go-Ri's scooter and collected the oversized bags holding everything else.