

"Hello? Paek Jaemin?"

He didn't recognize the woman's voice. "This is a private number. I'm hanging up. Don't call again."

Jaemin rarely got calls from anyone other than family and friends, but random calls happened. Once, a fanatic member of *Echos*, his team's fan group, discovered his phone number and left dozens of insane love messages before he could get a new number.

Idiot! Check the caller ID! Jaemin muttered to himself, about to hang up.

"No, wait!" the voice cried out softly over the line. "Ja-Ja... it's me."

Slowly, Jaemin brought the phone back to his ear.

Ja-Ja? Only one person ever called me that.

It had been years since he'd heard her voice. The memory of it flooded back through time—familiar and *unwelcome*. The one voice he had always loved. The one voice he never wanted to hear again.

His lungs forgot how to work, and the world narrowed to a phone clutched in his hand. With a rattling *clank* that jarred him back to the present, the air conditioner kicked on in the room, blasting arctic air that smelled faintly of curry and mildew.

“How...?”

“Your dad,” Kwan Seoyun whispered. “He gave me your number a while ago.”

Sitting up, Jaemin glanced over at the second hotel bed where his teammate, Han Tae-Si, lay sprawled, snoring louder than a jackhammer, half out of his covers, one leg hanging off the edge.

“And you're using it now? Why?”

The long, quiet pause stretched before she answered. “I honestly don't know. I shouldn't have bothered you. I'm sorry. I'll go now.” Just before she clicked off, he heard a child's cry in the background.

Jaemin stared at the phone for a long moment. *Maybe I'm hallucinating. This must be a dream. The time zones and the complicated Indian tour must be playing tricks with my head.*

He threw the phone down, flopped back on the bed, and closed his eyes. The air conditioning clunked off, and slowly, the room refilled with humidity from outside. He hugged the spare pillow over his head to block out Tae-Si's snoring, curled into a ball, and tried to go back to sleep before he had to fly home in the morning.

At two o'clock the following afternoon, Insatiable 7—or IN7, as they were widely known—landed at Incheon Airport. Outside customs, fans and the media awaited the seven guys, escorted by their managers and bodyguards.

The crowd squeezed in tighter, creating a bottleneck and forcing the bodyguards to earn their pay. Every overseas trip seemed harder. More stressful. More complicated than the last. Jaemin loved meeting the fans, but sometimes the

pressure, the screams, and the cameras were too much. Today, all he could manage was a wave, and he shifted closer to his guard.

Midday traffic from Incheon Airport to Seoul crawled along at a nightmarish pace, but it gave Jaemin a chance to catch up on sleep. Crammed on one side of the packed limo van, too exhausted to pay attention to the other voices, he tucked his travel blanket around him.

The onions and Indian curry from the airplane meal wafted through the air—thanks to the overworked heaters—and irritated his nose. Pulling the blanket tighter around his head, he slept the entire way, shutting out the trip, his friends, *and* the late-night phone call.

The drive to SKEC—the South Korean Entertainment Company in downtown Seoul—where they all trained and most still lived in studio-style dorms, took twice as long as expected. Snow and ice blanketed the Campus and glinted off the glass-and-steel buildings in the late-afternoon sun.

Within seven years, SKEC transformed a single downtown building into a city within a city. The complex now stretched across several blocks, housing dorms, gyms, dining halls, design studios, and a massive production stage. The newly renovated U-shaped recording center expanded the company's reach beyond radio into global film and television sound production. Ringed by tall fences, the complex intimidated all who tried to sneak in to see their favorite stars and kept the newbie trainees on the straight and narrow.

IN7 grew up amid the bustle of construction and, in the midst of it all, clawed their way to the top of the music charts—around the *world*.

Their long trip from India still wasn't over. Manager Kim

insisted on holding the wrap-up tour meeting before their well-needed break. As soon as the meeting ended, the entire touring crew—from lighting to makeup to the seven guys up front—scattered like flies.

Kwon Yejoon looked over at Jaemin as they packed their notebooks and headed out the door. “You aren’t going to Busan, are you?” When Jaemin shook his head, Yejoon grabbed both their travel bags from the pile in the hall. Not waiting for a response, he called over his shoulder, “Let’s go. You’re coming home with me.”

Two hours later, Jaemin collapsed onto his friend’s fluffy, pristine couch and looked out the long bank of windows into the private backyard. Fresh snow blanketed the beautifully landscaped garden, flowerpots, chairs, and large rectangular pool.

Yejoon, the first to make it big, primarily through his side gigs in acting and modeling, made *serious* bank. He also came from a wealthy family. He could easily afford the impressive home in the expensive, secluded hills of Seoul. Unfortunately, because of his schedule, the house usually sat empty, unless his sister and her children came to use the pool.

When Yejoon joined him after showering, Jaemin handed him a beer from the ice bucket and threw his legs onto the coffee table, glancing out the windows into the growing dusk. “Why do you own a pool if you can’t swim?”

“I liked the house, but I got stuck with the pool. One day, maybe I’ll learn how. I’ll add lessons to my schedule,” Yejoon quipped ruefully. He took a long swig of his drink and leaned back on his elbows. “I like it here. It’s so peaceful. But man, it’s so far away. I should have listened to Abeoji and gotten an apartment in Gangnam. I could’ve walked to Campus.” He looked out over the trees and the wall rimming his property.

Jaemin chuckled as he looked around the luxurious home. "Mmm, and leave all this? You'd hate Gangnam. Your father wouldn't leave you alone, and your mom would visit you every day!"

"Don't remind me! Eomeoni keeps buying me new furniture, and she has no idea how much food I have to throw out when she comes here. I can't eat half of it on my new diet, and the rest goes bad! Tteokbokki and *kimchi* are nasty when they spoil!"

Yejoon begged his part-time housekeeper to pay him a mercy visit before their trip to India. The elderly lady with a cast-iron stomach emptied the fridge while he stood nearby, holding his nose and retching. Rolling her eyes and laughing, the evil woman purposefully walked near him on her way to the door, waving the stinking bag of trash as he ran away.

For the next several hours, Jaemin and Yejoon talked quietly. Twinkling lights on the trees outside, muted by layers of snow, and a single lamp between them reflected off white marble and blond wood to cast shadows across the large, modern living room. They each lay on separate couches under blankets, barely moving.

"So, whose call are you waiting for?" Yejoon asked.

Jaemin jumped, and his head swiveled around at the unexpected question.

"You've been staring at your phone all night." Yejoon gestured to the quiet phone on the coffee table and pulled the blanket back around his shoulder.

Blushing, Jaemin reached forward and turned his phone upside down. "Sorry."

Yejoon snorted. "You just seem different tonight."

Everything okay? You didn't go home."

"Driving back and forth to Busan is too annoying for such a short break, and I don't want to take the train. Besides, Omma is with Noona, my second sister. She's pregnant again."

"Mmm. That's nice." Yejoon took a sip of his beer and grimaced at the warm, bitter taste before settling deeper into his cushion and pulling a pillow under his neck. "Your family is huge and getting bigger." He shot him a sideways glance. "What else is bothering you? I know you. You're a teddy bear. Your sister's pregnancy wouldn't cause that pouty face. That's a lousy excuse for not going home."

Stealing another glance at his phone, Jaemin thought about Seoyun. Her late-night phone call unnerved him. *What was with that call? Why now? Why...? What did she want?*

For almost ten years, he managed to bury the memories of his childhood friend, playmate, and first crush. When he left home, he swore never to speak to her again, and it took a long time to get over the pain in his heart.

"Have you ever..." Jaemin's drunk-fuddled mind stumbled as he tried to think of what to ask. "Has anyone from your past ever reached out to you unexpectedly? Someone you never thought you would hear from again?"

"Did they want something from you?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Did you want to hear from them?"

"No," Jaemin spat out forcefully, then quietly huffed. "I don't know. I thought I didn't.... It's complicated," he amended quietly after a long pause. "They were one of the main reasons I left to go to the Art Academy before joining IN7."

The massive abstract painting on the far wall confused Jaemin as much as his thoughts did. Giving up on figuring everything out, he sighed. "I don't know."

Yejoon's head lolled to the side as he looked at his friend with tired, glassy eyes. "Was complicated or still *is*? You left home a long time ago, so... you haven't talked to her since you left?"

At Jaemin's startled look and feeble denial, Yejoon snorted and lifted his head back up off the pillow. "Dude. Of course, it would be a girl. You're way too easy to read."

When Jaemin still didn't answer, Yejoon asked again, adjusting his broad shoulders against the wide couch cushion. "Was complicated or still *is*?"

"Was. Is. I think. I... A lot... happened..." *What can I say when I don't even know what's going on?*

Again, Yejoon snorted. "Well, that explains everything. Sounds like you need to find out. You're going to be miserable until you do, and we'll have to put up with that annoying face of yours until then."

"So, now you're turning into Go-Ri? What's with all the sage advice?" Jaemin *tsked* at him and threw an empty can in his direction.

Yejoon swatted it away at the last second, and the can rolled under a nearby chair. With a grin, he sat up and gave a half-bow. "Yeah, I channeled my inner gongjunim." As he stood and wobbled past his friend, Yejoon ruffled Jaemin's hair. "But you know that's what our princess would say, and she's right. Start with a text. I'll leave you now. Goodnight."

Choi Go-Ri, their *hyung's* girlfriend, was known for figuring things out. She always knew just the right thing to say. The

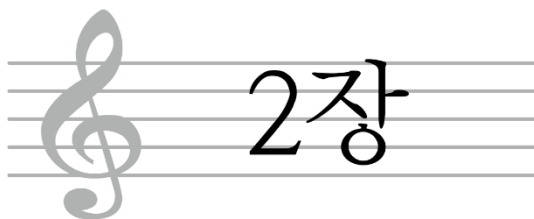
other six in the group were mildly jealous of their leader, Kim Baebin, for finding such a diamond of a girl.

Curling his knees up, Jaemin pulled the blanket tighter around him and stared at the lights outside. *Maybe I should ask Go-Ri for advice....*

The large, empty house made barely a sound, as if frozen, waiting for him to process everything. The stillness echoed, trapping old voices inside his head.

Finally, he reached for his phone, but after several attempts, he set it back down. Anger and fear shouldn't dominate his first texts to Kwan Seoyun.

After ten years, what do I say? Why now? Why did it only take one tiny phone call to reopen the wound I'd thought healed years ago?



They had been friends since they could walk. Jaemin, Seoyun, and the others ruled the neighborhood playground. The six of them were always together, from the swing set to sleepovers.

Dae-Hyun introduced Jaemin to Pokémon. Do-won taught Ji-ho how to play soccer. Jaemin and Hajoon spent all their lunch money on manga and passed them around to the others after they finished reading. During a game of Truth or Dare, Seoyun kissed Jaemin.

They loved playing Mafia or any other game that involved keeping a secret, mainly because, no matter what, Jaemin always lost. His wide, expressive eyes and ready smile always gave him away. Everyone waited to see whether his dimple—his biggest tell—appeared before making their bets.

The group split into different classes in middle school, but they stayed close and always met up after school to walk home and study at someone's place. The families often traveled to the country or the beach together, giving the friends joint vacations.

Since the kiss a year earlier, Dae-Hyun noticed Jaemin's puppy-dog tail wagging whenever he looked at Seoyun.

"You're a chicken! Ask Seo out!" Dae-Hyun dribbled past Jaemin and drove in for a lay-up.

Jaemin didn't stand a chance and let his friend run past, watching the ball swish through the hoop. He stunk at basketball, but Dae-Hyun played on the school team and loved showing off. "Stop it! We're just friends. What if she says no? How am I supposed to face her after that?!"

"Then she's dumb. Come here, I'll date you." Dae-Hyun, sweaty and laughing, dropped the ball and chased Jaemin around the court. He only quit when three other friends arrived, but he still winked and blew Jaemin kisses behind their backs.

Jaemin groaned when Seoyun walked onto the court a few minutes later. The guys out-muscled her, but she was an excellent point guard and a fast runner.

His ears burned as Dae-Hyun intentionally split the friends into teams—pitting Jaemin against Seo. She stood taller than all of them. Jaemin hated guarding her. All he could focus on was her growing breasts in front of his face and the way her cheeks flushed a pretty pink with exertion.

Dae-Hyun always does this! This is worse than being picked last. I feel like a fool! The distraction made him uncomfortable, and Jaemin glanced around at his friends. None of them seemed to notice his predicament as they got into position, ready to start the game.

For another month, Dae-Hyun continued teasing him, as if Jaemin's discomfort were part of the game. He would either interrupt their walk home from school or subtly pair them up on the bus or at lunch.

Unable to stand it any longer, Jaemin finally mustered the courage to ask Seoyun out—just the two of them, for ice cream after school. He couldn't believe her text when she agreed to meet him alone at the gate so they could walk together.

We're going out! I'm gonna ask her to date me. Should I do it while we walk there... or afterward? If she says no.... I'll wait until after. Just in case.

The study session blessedly ended on time, and Jaemin quickly packed his books and pencil case. *I can't believe I'm going on a date with Seo!* Jaemin shook his head and sucked in a breath to calm the pounding in his chest.

No. It's not a date. Not yet.... Just two friends meeting up, he told himself. But after shoving the last book into his bag, he nearly ran for the door, his reminder forgotten. *I'm so excited! We're going on a date!*

To avoid getting caught by a hall monitor, Jaemin cut through the lunchroom and rushed out the nearest side door to make it to the gate first. Disappointed, he watched all his friends group together just ahead of him.

How do Seo and I separate from them? I don't want everyone tagging along, and Dae-Hyun will surely tease me again. Jaemin ran to catch up to them, wondering what to do.

"Anyone going to Jaemin's play this weekend?" Dae-Hyun asked as Jaemin grew close enough to overhear him.

Jaemin's steps slowed as his stomach twisted into knots, and he fell in behind the group, careful to stay on the opposite side of the row of pillars. Something in Dae-Hyun's tone—too casual, too light—made him hesitate.

Dae-Hyun let out an exaggerated yawn and casually draped an arm over Seoyun's shoulder. "I forgot which one this is. The singing one or the dancing one?"

Seoyun shrugged off his weight but didn't answer.

"Ugh, Mom's making me go," Do-won groaned. "It's

gonna be so long. Why does he always pick the ones with all the singing?"

"Right?" Ji-ho jumped in. "My parents are going, too. They're acting like it's a big deal, but it's just Jaemin doing his thing again. He's always on stage for something."

Dae-Hyun made a thoughtful sound—almost agreeing, but not quite. It was just enough to keep them going. He glanced sideways, gauging whether Seoyun would add anything. She kept her eyes forward.

"At least you just have to sit through a play, even if it's stupid," Hajoon said, voice rising. "My dad told me we're going to the farm again next month for the Fall Cleaning. I'm so tired of it. We go every year, and there's nothing to do except ride bikes and help with the orchard work. It's boring."

"No kidding," Do-won agreed. "And Jaemin's always showing off about how big his family is and how much land they have. Like, we get it. Your family's loaded."

"Yeah, and he doesn't even have to study," Ji-ho added. "Gets top marks in everything. Must be nice."

Jaemin's ears burned as they continued. His friends—his best friends—laughed and piled on, each trying to outdo the other's criticism. He pressed his back against the pillar, hidden and unable to move. Dae-Hyun stayed quiet now, but Jaemin could picture the small smile on his face. The one that meant he'd gotten exactly what he wanted.

Seoyun's voice cut through, sharp and tight. "I need to go."

"What's your problem?" Do-won asked.

"Nothing. See you." She edged away from the group, and Dae-Hyun let her go this time.

The others shrugged and kept walking toward the gate, their voices fading as they argued about whether the farm finally had Wi-Fi.

Jaemin stood frozen behind the pillar, waiting for them to leave so he could slip away unnoticed.

But Dae-Hyun didn't follow them. Instead, he caught Seoyun's wrist and pulled her behind the far pillar—the one closest to the gate.

Jaemin's stomach lurched. *What is he doing?* He couldn't see them clearly from where he stood—just shadows and movement behind the thick concrete post. But he heard the hum of Dae-Hyun's voice, low and smug. Then, silence.

A moment later, Dae-Hyun stepped out from behind the pillar, laughing. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing something shiny across his skin. He glanced back, then sauntered toward the gate, calling out loudly enough for anyone nearby to hear: "See you later, Seo!"

Jaemin's breath stuck in his throat. His chest ached, and blood pounded in his ears as he struggled to breathe. He pressed his back against the pillar, trying to process what he'd just seen and heard. He felt each heavy heartbeat and began counting them.

A few seconds passed—ten, maybe thirty, he couldn't tell—before Seoyun emerged.

She stood near the post by the street, her back to him. She pulled a mirror from her bag. The small circle caught the afternoon light as she opened it. Checking her reflection, she touched her lips, then snapped the compact closed. She glanced around, tucking her hair behind her ear.

Is she really waiting for me? After... that? I thought.... No.

I'm just a joke. Seo set me up so they'd have something to laugh at.

Jaemin turned and walked away through the side gate, the autumn wind cutting through his jacket and stinging his eyes. Every crunch of fallen leaves under his feet echoed in his ears like his friends' cruel commentary.

Jaemin spent the rest of the evening finishing his homework, and just before turning off his computer, he downloaded the private-school application he'd received after his last play.

A month ago, Mr. Sun, the director of the Busan Art Academy, approached him backstage and asked him to apply, describing the drama, music, and dance training that the Academy offered.

Honored as he was to be singled out, Jaemin still turned him down. Acting and singing were hobbies, and he couldn't fathom leaving his current school and friends. He was thirteen. He wasn't worried about the future. That lay too far ahead.

Replaying the scene he witnessed that afternoon on repeat, Jaemin's mind automatically turned it into an avant-garde drama flick, complete with riotous music and unintelligible animal squeals. It devastated him. Every mean and painful comment they made reverberated in his mind as he stared at the Academy's offer. The cursor blinked at him.

He filled out the application and printed it for his parents to sign.

He stayed in bed for two days, hiding under the covers, wishing he could turn off his brain. On the second night, Omma brought him a dinner tray and, instead of leaving, sat down beside him. She stared at him, not letting him squirm away.

“Talk to me. I know you aren’t sick.” She could read him like a book. Of the entire large, loving family, the two of them shared a unique bond. His five siblings hated that he couldn’t keep a secret because Omma always got him to spill the truth.

The comforting smell of onion and seafood from his mom’s *dongnae pajeon* pancakes on the tray made his stomach rumble, but his hunger couldn’t break through his sorrow. Before he knew it, tears filled his eyes.

Sparks flew when Omma learned how his oldest, closest friends treated her little boy behind his back—the same friends she practically helped raise since they were in the cradle.

Concerning the kiss... well, she wasn’t ready to give her eldest boy up to any girl—even if it was sweet Seoyun, whom she adored. That was a separate issue, but it ranked a close second to his friends’ torturous backstabbing.

After listening and holding her boy tight, Omma contemplated the private-school application. “Is this why you’re interested in the Academy now? Do you want to further your art—or do you really just want to hide?” She wouldn’t let him look away.

Jaemin thought of nothing else since he printed the forms. “Can’t it be both?” Tears rolled down his cheeks. “I don’t know how I can ever go back to school and face my friends again. I feel like they lied to me and betrayed me. How long have they felt this way? It hurts so much. I know I shouldn’t, but I just want to run away. I never want to see them again.”

He sniffed. “Omma, I really like acting and singing. I wasn’t interested in the Academy, but now... if they want me,

then maybe I should go. I want to see how far I can take it. I want to try. Now might be my only chance."

He peeked up at his mother, gauging her reaction. "I... want to stay at the Academy dorm, too. The school year already started, and if I'm going to do this, then I need to do it all the way."

Omama looked toward the ceiling for guidance. "I'll sign the application. But you're going to school tomorrow. If you plan to be a star, you need to learn how to hide in public. You can't do that in your bed." With a pat on his cheek, she left him alone to think.

Two weeks later, Jaemin pulled his suitcase into his new dorm room, trying to convince himself he wasn't running away—just running in a better direction.

Even though Jaemin still lived in Busan, only a few miles away from his family, it felt like a different world. His classwork included extra hours of drama, dance, and singing lessons, and his roommate was interesting... if a bit strange.

Lee Jo-seok never studied, preferring to read manga and play guitar at all kinds of crazy hours. The guy owned more guitar picks than socks and lost them everywhere. Every time Jaemin swept the floor around their bunk beds and desks, he found at least a dozen in the dust pile.

By the time fall slipped into winter, freezing the grounds surrounding the Academy, Jaemin had immersed himself in the new school, and his hobby had become his passion. He'd not only found his goal in life but also new friends who actually believed in him.

I'm in heaven.



Jaemin and his friends lay sprawled on the dance floor, half-assing their way through warm-ups before the teacher came in. His second year at the Academy included a fantastic, advanced jazz and hip-hop class.

Still fairly new to formal dance classes, he loved the warmth of the wood floors, the barre along the mirrors, and the hypnotic, potent energy of the dance studio, even when it stood empty.

His *sunbaes*, the older schoolmates who were a level above him, were right. The instructor, fresh from the thriving Seoul music industry, was excellent. Even in their free time, when they were goofing off, Mr. Woo taught them new dance moves from K-pop groups.

For Jaemin, who still felt torn over how to narrow down his dream goal, Mr. Woo's class combined all three of his passions into a single love. The drama surrounding K-pop—the dance, the music, the stage, the videos—it all scratched his itch.

Woo-jin plugged his iPod shuffle into the studio stereo and found their new favorite song, which they had been learning for a week during their downtime. Everyone popped up as one, preferring to dance their way through warm-ups.

Halfway through the song, Mr. Woo walked in and turned off the sound system to a chorus of complaints.

A group of outsiders followed him into the room and sat in a row of chairs along the side wall. Three months into the new year, the frequent guest instructors and spectators who sat in the chairs no longer excited the class; they were rotating, boring fixtures in the mirrored dance studio.

Mr. Woo clapped for order and began class.

Two hours later, after mopping their faces and changing out of their dance sneakers, the students filed out of the room to head to their next class. Mr. Woo, standing with the visitors, called out to Jaemin to hold him back.

Drawing the young teenager into the circle of guests, Mr. Woo made introductions. "Paek Jaemin, I want you to meet CEO Park, his assistant, Mr. Cho, and Manager Kim."

CEO Park, the taller, thinner senior of the group with the build of a former dancer, reached out his hand. "We're with SKEC, out of Seoul."

SKEC? I've heard of them... but.... Jaemin searched his memory bank and came up blank.

"We aren't as big as SF Entertainment—yet—but we're getting there. We already have a rock band, one boy group, and a girl group established. Now we're looking to create a new team. We want you to come to Seoul next week for tryouts."

Jaemin blinked. *Whoa? Me? But I've only just started dancing.* He looked at Mr. Woo for confirmation.

His teacher kept his composure, but Jaemin could see his eyes sparkling. "I'll clear it with the Academy, but you'll need a parent to take you."

The shorter, nondescript man with wiry black hair and glasses handed him a thick manila envelope. "I'm Manager Kim. Here's all the information you'll need. I look forward to seeing you next week."

As Mr. Woo escorted the three men out, Jaemin stood frozen, his jaw gaping and his hand still outstretched, holding the packet.

For three days, Jaemin and his father stayed in Seoul at

an uncle's house while Jaemin underwent the rigorous tryout and interview process that SKEC conducted to create a new male K-pop group.

The whole operation terrified and electrified Jaemin. Each time staff called his bib number, pulling him forward into the next round, his father gave him a reassuring nod and opened his laptop to continue his crash course in the unfamiliar K-pop world.

Woefully out of his league but still a doting parent, Jaemin's father wasn't about to ship his third child and first-born son, alone, at fifteen, to a massive city five hours away to be trained in a career he didn't understand.

Two months later, Jaemin boarded the train by himself with two suitcases.

Eighteen guys crammed themselves into a four-bedroom skyscraper apartment in downtown Seoul while construction bloomed around them. They shared small dance rooms on the lower floors with two senior dance groups and split time in the recording studio, learning all the intricacies of making an album.

Within months, SKEC whittled eighteen members down to seven. Paek Jaemin, the second-oldest member of the newly formed boy group, Insatiable 7, started his third school in three years and moved into the brand-new Campus dorms, where he lived with his teammates under lock and key.

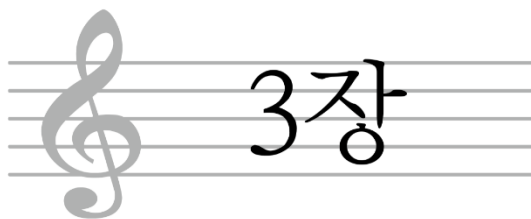
School was hard. Training was harder. The year at the Academy gave him a small taste of what life would be like, but nothing prepared him for Seoul. Jaemin spent his first winter in the capital city running between buildings on Campus.

Six months passed before the group ventured outside the

walls. Manager Kim and a small camera crew hustled IN7 into a busy fountain square near one of the Joseon palaces to perform for the first time in public for a live, "impromptu" exhibition.

At the end of each day, Jaemin fell into bed, too exhausted to move but gloriously happy. He missed his family and Busan, but he loved what he was doing, loved his new friends, and truly felt IN7 had a chance to succeed.

Most of all, he didn't have the time or the energy to think about his old "friends."



Jaemin told himself—*again*—that he didn't owe Seoyun anything. *Not a single word. Not after ten years.* He lay on the couch in Yejoon's darkened living room, the phone heavy in his hand.

He typed before he could stop himself—before memory, pride, or fear could get in the way.

J: HELLO

The reply came almost immediately.

S: YOU'RE HOME

S: UR ON THE NEWS

She'd been waiting. After everything, she'd been waiting for his response.

J: YES. SMALL TOUR. INDIA

Trip talk. Safe. Neutral. Several more careful messages passed between them—surface-level, cautious, testing the waters. Then the air filled with dead space.

Jaemin stared at the painfully bright screen, his chest tight. They were dancing around everything that mattered.

J: ~~WHY DID YOU~~

His thumb held the backspace button until the message disappeared. So many questions ran through his mind, and he couldn't settle on one. He rested the phone on his chest and stared at the chandeliers. *After all this time, how do I start?*

There were so many whys. *Why do I care anymore? Why did all of you, who were supposed to be my friends, hurt me? Why did you choose Dae-Hyun? Why are you contacting me now? Why couldn't you just leave me alone?*

Which question mattered most? Was there even any point in bringing up the past?

J: WHY?

J: WHAT DO YOU WANT?

He hit send before he could second-guess either question and stared at the phone. No bubbles bounced. No response came. The silence in the room pressed on him, and he counted under his breath as each second passed.

After several minutes, Jaemin screamed into his covered knees, then found the way to one of Yejoon's guestrooms, where he showered and pulled on *mostly* clean sweats and a long-sleeve tee. Crawling into bed, he plugged in his phone and saw three new messages.

S: I DON'T KNOW

S: I GUESS I JUST WANTED TO SAY I'M PROUD OF U.

S: I WISH U HADN'T LEFT WITHOUT SAYING GOODBYE.

What am I supposed to say to that? Did she really think that made it all okay? Why would he say goodbye to "friends" who hurt him? Jaemin set the phone down without answering and closed his eyes. The phone buzzed with another string of texts, but instead of looking, he crushed a pillow over his head.

When he couldn't take it anymore, Jaemin threw the pillow away and yanked the phone off the charger.

S: IT WASN'T THE SAME AFTER YOU LEFT

S: THE GANG FELL APART. DAE-HYUN AND I MARRIED, BUT WE HAVEN'T HEARD FROM ANYONE ELSE SINCE GRADUATION.

S: WE ALL MISSED U

S: WE LISTEN TO U ALL THE TIME

He let out a loud snort. *Missed me, my ass! Did she and Dae-Hyun have sex to one of my songs?* Jaemin wanted to gag. He had so many rude things he wanted to say back.

He hadn't escaped the hometown rumor mill, so he knew vaguely about the wedding. But he cut off anyone who tried to feed him happily-ever-after stories and forbade the family from mentioning the *loving* couple.

J: I KNOW ABOUT THE WEDDING. CONGRATS.

J: DON'T LIE THO. I'M SURE EVERYONE'S HAPPY I LEFT.

J: U ALL DIDN'T HAVE TO PRETEND TO BE MY FRIEND ANYMORE.

Without waiting for a reply, Jaemin powered off his phone and plugged it back in. He rolled away, hugging the spare pillow tightly and dragging his fingers over the knitted blanket, counting each tightly woven bump. The ache in his chest mixed nauseatingly with the beer from earlier.

Three hours later, he fell asleep.

The next day, Yejoon met him at the kitchen island and gave him a questioning look. Jaemin avoided him, dishing a second egg over the rice the housekeeper made earlier. Taking the hint, Yejoon simply reached for a coffee mug.

After shutting the heavy curtains against the blinding sunlight streaming in, the two friends carried a jug of water, aspirin, and plenty of steaming, extra-thick coffee to the living room to lounge off their hangovers.

It took several hours for Jaemin to feel like a normal human and awake enough to call his family. He'd been home for almost twenty-four hours, and he hadn't contacted his mom—a grave error on his part. While Yejoon slept, he crept to a quiet den on the second floor for what promised to be a *fun* phone call.

As predicted, he earned a long lecture.

With six children, Omma had perfected the art of grievance suffering years ago. The family supported his career, but the separation was hard on all of them, especially her. One of her babies left the fold too early, and she always made sure to remind him of that knife wound to her heart.

Eventually, she finished the sibling-drama updates and got down to business about the generational family orchard. "You need to attend the board meeting in March. We're planning the Spring Cleaning in the main field in April and have to set the budget for the new year."

Jaemin groaned. He scrubbed at his eyes and the new headache forming between them. Tugging his head toward his shoulder, he felt a satisfying *pop* in his neck, but it didn't ease the pain.

He put her on speaker and started scrolling through the packed calendar on his phone. *I hate these things!*

"Omma, I'm busy every day in March. I'll give you my proxy vote." He was delighted to pass off yet another meeting. "Uncle Jun texted me. They need new tractors and trucks, particularly for the Kumquat farm in the south. I'll help cover that."

"No way. I was your proxy for the last four votes." Jaemin could hear the firm, unmovable pushback. He wouldn't win. "I can't keep doing it, or the rest will think I'm pushing my decisions on you. We know you're busy. So, just give us ten minutes on the fifteenth. We'll work around you."

Jaemin groaned and zeroed in on March fifteenth. He had a concert and a closed-door meeting with the leaders of *Echos*, their fan club. "Ommaa!"

"Do it. I'll contact Manager Kim if I have to."

Crap. She would, too. And Manager Kim was a wuss with her. If I don't give her ten, she'll get an hour... or maybe two. "Fine! What else?"

"Spring Cleaning in April. You haven't come in years. The Imo's miss you."

Secretly thrilled, he quickly responded, having already memorized April. "Give all the Aunties my love, but nope. Firm no on April. I've got a big promo with a tour all over the region." Jaemin heard her long-suffering sigh but knew he'd won that point.

The last time he'd been to the Spring Cleaning was almost ten years ago, with his old friends... *I still can't go there yet.*

"We end the tour in Busan, as usual. I'll make sure to have tickets for the family." He sweetened the pot. "And I'll make sure we can all spend the night at home afterward. Will you make space for everyone?"

He knew she would.

"I'll figure it out somehow." He could hear the perk in her dramatic groan over the speaker. "Let me know the date. Love you, Ae-gi. But you should go see the family." She just couldn't let that ball drop.

"I'll think about it. And please, for God's sake, stop calling me baby!"

After the call, he checked his messages. Baebin and Tae-Si had reached out, along with a girl from Campus he was having a fling with. There were several from Seoyun, as well.

He answered his friends, canceled the upcoming date with the girl, and avoided Seoyun.

Not today. Not now.



On March fifteenth, Jaemin found the quietest backstage corner available and patched into the board meeting already underway. Families and co-owners all over Korea could hear the growing crowd and thumping music behind him.

After listening patiently to Uncle Jun and Auntie Bong-cha drone on for ten minutes about the flooding in the southern fields in Jeollanam-do and the condition of the ditches around the main farm in North Chungcheong province, he'd had enough. "I'm sorry, everyone, but I have to go," he cut in.

Pressing a hand to his other ear as the announcer's voice and their opening music carried over the arena sound system, he tried to hide how thrilled he was by this perfect timing. "I've read the paperwork and approve of everything. If it comes to a vote, I agree to widen the ditches, and I'm helping fund the new tractors and trucks. Love you all. Bye!"

He hung up before anyone could get a word in, passed the phone to Manager Kim, and caught up with the guys for the pre-show huddle.



Kwan Seoyun sipped her ginger tea, testing its spicy heat, and turned down the volume on her work laptop as she passed the table.

Her four-year-old pouted at the adjustment, but she simply smiled, sinking cross-legged in front of her stack of ungraded papers piled on the coffee table. “Music stays in the living room. Mrs. Han next door doesn’t need to hear it, too.”

Unbothered by the reprimand, Jeong continued copying the dance his mother secretly downloaded at work a month ago. For being so little, he managed to keep up with the fast-paced moves. After a few weeks, he almost had the chorus down pat. For the parts he still couldn’t get, he filled in with butt wiggles and chaotic arm movements, holding a fat red crayon as his microphone.

Seoyun couldn’t concentrate on her work. *Why did I call him? What made me finally do it?* It was such an impulsive, stupid moment of weakness. Ten years of longing and loneliness, ten years of wondering what happened—of wondering why her best friend and crush suddenly left home without a word—hadn’t changed her feelings.

It was just a mistake. But watching Jeong dance and sing along to Ja-Ja on the screen, she wondered if contacting him wasn’t weakness at all... just the first moment she finally felt

unafraid to open the old wound.

Watching the only spark of joy in her life dance in the minuscule free space she managed to create for them, her mind unwittingly flicked to the past—the past when she and Ja-Ja were kids, and then her survival after marrying Dae-Hyun.

Maybe Dae-Hyun running away from responsibility was for the best. It left her no choice but to stand on her own—alone.

If only there hadn't been a poster taped to the walls of the bus stop the other morning—an advertisement for a US-Korean military demonstration for foreign dignitaries. The closing ceremony would be an IN7 concert at USAG Humphreys in Pyeongtaek.

Her base. The base where she worked, teaching Korean to American children.

Ja-Ja is coming here.

She couldn't take her eyes off the sign. Maybe. Just maybe... she could see him again. Even from afar.

Jeong squealed with joy, staring at the poster. "Mommy, read it to me! What's it say?"

"They have new music and are telling people about a concert." Seoyun gazed wistfully at Ja-Ja's picture, searching for the dimple in his left cheek that only appeared when he genuinely smiled.

"Are they coming here?" Jeong pointed to the two words he could read: Pyeongtaek and Humphreys. "I want to go!"

Hating to disappoint him, Seoyun sighed and ruffled his hair. "Yes, they're coming here. But it's a government thing.

Not for us.”

He looked up, puzzled. “But you work there. Can’t you go? You would have fun.”

“Yeah. I would have lots of fun.” She looked into her son’s wide, cherubic face—the little boy who didn’t understand how sorrowful his life was and who only wanted happiness for others. “But I’d rather watch *you* dance.” She pinched his nose, grinning to hide her pain. “You are so much more entertaining!”

“Mech! Mooom!” Jeong grimaced and pushed her hand away. “You moved my boogers!” He scrubbed his nose and stepped closer to the poster. She managed to still his hands before he touched the pretty lady sitting nearby on the bench, dressed in pristine office clothes.

Each morning, he’d gaze lovingly at the poster, pretending to read the words, memorizing every detail, every strand of hair, and copying every pose of the seven singers.

“Mommy! Mommy!” Jeong waved his hand a hair’s breadth from her nose, swiftly bringing her back to the present in their apartment. “Watch me!” He turned back to the laptop and restarted the playback.

Seoyun clapped along as her little boy nailed Jaemin’s part of the song, even turning to the side and wrinkling his nose like Ja-Ja had done since elementary school. Seeing it twisted something inside her, and her smile faltered.

When the song ended, she quickly turned off the video before another could start. “Bedtime.” Seoyun raised a finger to stop the ensuing cry. “Should I make up a story or read a book?”

After brushing his teeth, mother and son snuggled

together in his narrow bed while she read two books and refused a third. She snapped off the light and left the door open a crack.

The quiet of the night hummed through the tiny apartment. She tiptoed around the living room, picking up Jeong's cars and crayons, carefully storing her laptop in her old, fraying backpack, and turning on the kettle for more tea.

Is there a way I could get us into the concert? The ad said it was for dignitaries. We'd only need one seat, or we could stand in the back...

Chewing the corner of her lip and tucking her hair around her ear, Seoyun typed a message to her American supervisor, afraid to second-guess herself.

S: SIR, IS THE UPCOMING IN7 CONCERT OPEN TO CIVILIAN EMPLOYEES?



The April promotional tour for their album, *Chasing You*, hit full swing. Small concerts before their recent trip to India served as warm-ups to boost their position on the charts. This month, IN7 needed to generate momentum and hype their song, “Summer Crush,” for the upcoming award season.

Their new, edgier sound and dance routines, which *Echos* had been clamoring for, fit flawlessly. Based on the feedback, they had a chance to win MAMA again—or at least the Melon or Hanteo awards coming up.

IN7 filled TV and radio station airwaves, as well as several internet channels, boosting their ratings. Each new album came with a tinge of fear that it would be a flop, but deep down, they believed in themselves and their efforts. All they had to do was sell it.

After seven years, they'd grown accustomed to the chaotic rhythm surrounding an album release: answering repetitive questions from the media, greeting fans, playing games on air, and somehow, making it all feel fresh and alive. This was their life, and they loved it.

The buildup culminated in a career-defining concert at the American military base in Pyeongtaek. The once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to perform before dignitaries and high-ranking officials from both the United States and Korea was thrilling yet nerve-racking.

As the group's main English speaker, Jaemin would share the spotlight with Kim Baebin, their *hyung* and leader. He wrote, rewrote, and polished his stage banter for days.

Streetlights glinted off the wet pavement as IN7 packed into the coach van with their managers and drove south. Nervous energy hummed through Jaemin, and he knew it wouldn't end until they moved on to the next show. He couldn't wait to spend a few quiet nights after the Busan concert with his family, whom he hadn't seen in months.

Daeho used the drive to surprise Echos with a vlive episode. His easy, lighthearted video call with their fans lifted the mood inside the van. By the time they pulled through Humphreys' gates, their spirits and the gray sky had brightened.

All day, they rehearsed for the evening show under the constant, watchful eyes of American guards. The group ran through the now-comfortable routine on the unfamiliar stage. As they changed into their first costumes, the guys could hear the crowd on the parade ground growing louder, and the announcer began his nonstop chatter over the loudspeaker.

In the backstage huddle, the seven friends drew a collective, shuddering breath, reminiscent of their debut concert.

"This show may be different, but it isn't our first, and it won't be our last," Baebin told them. He smirked and gave the group clown a teasing glance. "Unless Daeho speaks and declares war against the North."

The tension broke, and everyone snorted as Daeho stuck out his tongue at their leader. "Ha-ha. I'm the funny one—not you."

Grinning as one, they took to the stage under the setting

sun and glaring lights.



“Mommy, mommy, *mommy!*” Jeong squealed, tugging on her skirt as she steadied him when the lights came on. IN7 burst out to thundering, thumping music that pulsed through the crowd and flashed images on the Jumbotron. “Do you see them?!”

Seoyun’s heart skidded to a halt. When it rushed again, she couldn’t catch her breath. “Yeah, baby,” she whispered. “I see him.”

Watching every video of IN7 from the last seven years hadn’t prepared her for today.

Ja-Ja wasn’t the same boy who left at thirteen. The stage lights caught the sharp angles of his jaw, the breadth of his cheeks, and his dark, almost black eyes—which she used to tease him about, saying they gave away every emotion before his mouth could. He revved up the crowd with a confidence that the boy she knew never possessed. His dark hair, parted and pushed back, looked nothing like the messy school-day hair she remembered.

He always had stage appeal, but watching him live again brought tears to her eyes.

The darkening sky above them and the rain-soaked grass under their feet solidified the night into something magical. The crowd pressing in around them at the side of the venue lessened the evening’s chill. Amidst the multicolored spotlights flying across the stage and roving the audience, Seoyun’s hand automatically braced her son at her side. But her eyes remained riveted on Ja-Ja.

Her son’s jarring hops broke her trance, and she reached

down to ruffle Jeong's hair and adjust the strap on his red plastic earmuffs. The boy's face glowed with pure joy as he glanced up, then focused again on the show.

He wiggled and danced in the tight space allotted to him along the rope line with other minor on-base personnel. Time and again, he squeezed her hand, excited by a dance, a song, or the fleeting moments when one of the guys waved in their direction.

A young staffer leaned over the rope and shouted over the music. "I recommend staying put after the show. It'll be worth it." The woman giggled and winked at Seoyun before offering Jeong a high-five and moving away to monitor the row of spectators.

Seoyun's eyes widened, and her breath hitched again. *What? Surely, she didn't mean....* Seeing Ja-Ja on stage was one thing, but.... Her gaze dropped to her little boy. He'd never know what they missed if they left. *But how happy would he be to see them up close?*

For the rest of the concert, she battled with herself.

In the end, her mental gymnastics meant nothing. Immediately after their last bow, the seven tall, handsome members of IN7 bounded down the stage stairs and moved along the rope line, greeting fans.

Jeong leaned over the rope, watching them move closer. For each step they took, he jumped four.

Seoyun's pulse pounded like a jackrabbit. The ringing in her ears drowned out the music still blaring over the speakers. The crowd pressed in around them, and even if she'd wanted to pull Jeong away, she couldn't.

Tae-Si reached them first and performed a fancy foot

move in the grass. "I saw you dance with us! You'll be on stage one day!"

For once in his life, Jeong stood still. He gaped like a fish out of water at the thin rapper standing tall above him. Tae-Si laughed and moved down the line, only to be replaced by another IN7 member.

Near the end of the group, Jaemin passed by with his guard. Seeing Jeong's earmuffs, he stopped and knelt down. This cute little boy, running in place, his cheeks squished by the earmuffs that only highlighted his large, unique hazel green eyes, pleased Jaemin more than any of the stodgy dignitaries in the front row.

Tonight's concert would forever be one of his favorites, but fans like this boy were the ones he breathed for.

Not caring anymore about his sweat-caked makeup, his sore feet, or the lining of his coat that stuck to his damp skin, he grinned at the youngster. "I love your earmuffs! Did you know red's my favorite color?"

Now eye-to-eye with his favorite singer in the entire universe, Jeong found his voice. "Yes! Mommy told me. You're our favorite! We listen to you all the time, and she loves your dimple." His finger, faster than lightning, shot out and poked Jaemin's left cheek.

This kid's hysterical! Jaemin burst out laughing, his dimple deepening. He peeked up at Mom to see her reaction to the boy's blatant declaration and froze.

Time stood still as ten years melted away.

Taller, older, thinner. *Still beautiful.* Seo's hair hung low past her shoulders, fluttering in the light breeze; her large, warm brown eyes, with tiny flecks of gold, stared back at him.

He remembered to swallow when she tucked her hair behind an ear.

His eyes skidded back to the boy, and the swarming crowd around him faded away. For a moment, it was just him and the boy.

Of course.

Except for the wavy chestnut-brown hair, he was the spitting image of Dae-Hyun—down to the unique hazel eyes. Jaemin's fists clenched, the familiar fidget ring he'd worn for years biting into his skin.

The sound of the crowd rushed back around him as Jaemin rocked back on his heels, almost landing on his rear. Glancing at his guard, he motioned for a marker. Turning back to the boy, refusing to look up, he asked, pointing to the giant red earmuffs, "May I sign them?"

The boy squealed and quickly pulled off the muffs, passing them over. "Whoa! No wonder you're Mommy's favorite! You're nice! I want to dance like you—or be a race car driver."

"Aww! Thank you! That's a tough decision to make. Both jobs would be awesome." Jaemin tried to smile, but his hands shook as he uncapped the marker. "What's your name?"

"Jeong!"

Jaemin signed *To: Jeong and Seo. ♥ Ja-Ja.*

He placed the muffs gently over the boy's ears again. Staring at him for one last moment, he said quietly, "I love your eyes."

"Mommy says I look like Daddy. But I've only seen him in pictures. I hope he comes home soon." The boy sighed, his

shoulders drooping a fraction.

Shocked, Jaemin's eyes flew to Seoyun. He searched her flushed face and her eyes that wouldn't meet his.

Before he could respond, Kyong yanked on his arm. "We gotta go."

He let Kyong pull him to his feet and drag him down the line. Smiling, he waved to the fans he had to skip in order to catch up to the rest of the members and glanced back.

Mother and son had disappeared into the throng.

