

MIA

SingShong

【Is he really here?】
【Maybe.】

Yoo Joonghyuk's day began like this.

After brewing a black coffee and slicing the rye bread he'd bought yesterday, he grilled a chicken breast marinated in soda. He fried some eggs in a small pan. The key was to fry the whites while keeping the yolk runny.

Yoo Joonghyuk, grilling the egg white in an instant, lightly stirred the frying pan to plate the egg and cooked chicken. He added the washed lettuce and beetroot, and finally poured a cup of tomato juice for Yoo Mia.

“Hup!”

When he looked over his shoulder holding the plate, he saw Yoo Mia, who had jumped into a chair at the table, her eyes shining. Yoo Joonghyuk placed two plates and cups in their spots in a practised motion. After seeing the contents of the plate, Yoo Mia stuck out her bottom lip.

“Leaves.”

“Yes, it's salad.”

“It tastes bad.”

“It's delicious.”

“It was leaves yesterday.”

“There are eggs, too.”

“Egg.”

“Chicken too.”

“I'm bored of it.”

“Eat.”

Yoo Joonghyuk furrowed his thick eyebrows and said to Yoo Mia.

“You become what you eat.”

Yoo Mia looked between her small fist and her egg with a blunt expression. “I'm not leaves,” she mumbled. Yoo Joonghyuk watched Yoo Mia for a while, chewed and swallowed a fried egg, and opened his cell phone.

—Continued sluggishness. Is this the reputation of Team Ash these days?

—The fall of the Ash Kingdom is approaching.

—Team Ash is facing playoffs elimination due to a losing streak.

—Ash, who lost 3:2 to Team Viking, is eliminated from the playoffs.

—I heard there's some discord within Team Ash...

As he watched the articles appearing in rapid succession on the main portal, a subtle shadow appeared in Yoo Joonghyuk's eyes.

Team Ash.

The first team to win with him, and now one of the leading esports teams in Korea. However, his team had been struggling with recent sluggishness.

Yoo Joonghyuk scrolled down to check the article's comments.

—Has Ash lost again?

—All the bubbles are gone.

—It was frothy, but honestly, isn't it because of Yoo Joonghyuk's loss in this game?

—(This comment has been hidden due to reporting.)

Yoo Joonghyuk looked at the last comment for a long time. He couldn't see the contents, but he could guess what kind of comment it was from the comments right below.

—But Yoo Joonghyuk is an orphan, so I don't think there will be any damage?

Orphan.

Yoo Joonghyuk read the word with indifferent eyes. Words like that didn't really bother him. What bothered him was the words that weren't there.

—(This comment has been hidden due to reporting.)

How long had he been staring at the screen? His face was reflected on the blacked out display. Suddenly, the muscles in his right arm cramped. It had been a frequent occurrence lately – while eating, even while using the keyboard and mouse. Perhaps it was a lack of nutrients.

“Obabunny.”

A child who couldn't even properly say the words “oppa” or “orabeoni”. Come to think of it, he had never taught her the words. Yoo Joonghyuk wondered where she had learnt them.

Yoo Mia pushed her food around with her fork and said something he didn't understand.

“...?”

“You are what you eat.”

Yoo Joonghyuk pondered on the meaning of the words for a while. He picked up the egg Yoo Mia had left on her plate and ate it.

“Oooh! Mia's egg!”

Yoo Mia puffed up her cheeks.

Looking into the eyes of a child who looked just like him, Yoo Joonghyuk realised another day had begun.

“Joonghyuk-ah. Are you eating well?”

He was in the car heading to the practice room.

Kang Woohyun, the manager, glanced at Yoo Joonghyuk as if he was worried.

“Your face is looking thin. You have to eat well to play well.”

“I am eating well.”

“Are you just eating salad and chicken breast again? What sort of meal is that? Eat rice, eat beef!”

Yoo Joonghyuk didn't respond. He just felt strange. Why did people ask him what he ate if they weren't actually curious at all?

"I'm glad if you're really eating well."

Yoo Joonghyuk didn't know whether Kang Woohyun was really glad, or if he was just saying so. It was difficult for him to tell what a person was really thinking.

—Yoo Joonghyuk, how is your condition today?

The reporters at the stadium always asked him the same thing.

What is your condition today? What do you think about your opponent? What strategies do you have? What scores will you get? What do you think about the recent controversy?

Sometimes Yoo Joonghyuk answered honestly, and sometimes he didn't say anything. But no matter what he said, the published article always had an irrelevant headline that had nothing to do with what he had intended with his answer.

If that's the way it was going to be anyway, why the hell did they ask him questions? Yoo Joonghyuk couldn't figure out the answer, but at least he understood one thing.

That was their job.

"Are you reading the comments these days?"

When he looked up, he saw Kang Woohyun's worried eyes through the rear-view mirror.

"I told you to stop looking. They're all saying these things because they're jealous of you. There's no need to look up things like that and get upset."

It seemed to Kang Woohyun like he was looking at his phone. Actually, he wasn't wrong. In fact, someone's comment was on his screen.

—Yoo Joonghyuk's personality in reality is completely garbage.

Yoo Joonghyuk looked down at the comment.

Contrary to Kang Woohyun's words, Yoo Joonghyuk wasn't too offended.

—Isn't it Yoo Joonghyuk who ruined the atmosphere in the team? Everyone in the industry already knows.

If someone bore hostility towards him, all he needed to do was face that hostility. Then the situation was within his control.

—What do you guys know?

However.

—You guys say that you know that. However, how would you know if Yoo Joonghyuk is such a person or not?

Usually, people who write comments write comments often. However, it was the first time he had seen this username.

Demon King's Daughter

Yoo Joonghyuk looked at the comment for a long time, as if trying to figure out an opponent he had encountered for the first time.

“Joonghyuk-ah, we’re here.”

In the distance, the dazzling exterior of the building where his team’s practice room was located could be seen. Yoo Joonghyuk, who had zoned out, moved his gaze back to his phone. He tried to find the comment he had just read, but couldn’t see it. Did it disappear? Or did he see it wrong?

“Looking at the schedule, you’ll be busy until late. Should I take care of Mia?”

“Please.”

“Is she still not speaking well? Shouldn’t you take her to see a doctor? That’s what parents...”

Kang Woohyun, who had been talking all the way til that point, seemed to think he’d made a mistake and laughed.

“Go. Don’t worry about Mia.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, the new manager came in today. Please say hello when you meet her. I think she’s a fan of yours.”

Yoo Joonghyuk nodded lightly. He looked at Kang Woohyun for a moment before getting out.

“What? Did you need something?”

Yoo Joonghyuk wondered for a moment if he should ask Kang Woohyun if he was eating well, then shook his head and went to the practise room as usual.

【■■■ changes her modifier to ‘Demon King’s Daughter’.】

【‘Demon King’s Daughter’ says that there is a mysterious skill here.】

【■■■ changes her modifier to ‘Poison Spit’.】

【‘Demon King’s Daughter’ says that’s a bit scary.】

Yoo Joonghyuk went upstairs and immediately crossed the hallway straight into the private practice room. This room was made only for Yoo Joonghyuk. A state-of-the-art computer, gaming desk, and gaming chair were placed in a space measuring 15-20 meters. Various sports drinks and nutritional supplements were provided. At first glance it looked like an ordinary gaming room. Except for the fact that all four sides of the room were made of glass.

—Please take notice of others.

This room was a punishment given by the director to Yoo Joonghyuk, who seldom followed his advice. Everyone passing by the room was able to watch Yoo Joonghyuk to their heart’s content, as if they were observing monkeys in a zoo, and Yoo Joonghyuk could also see them.

—Yoo Joonghyuk has excellent performance, but little cooperation. It takes training to internalise the gaze of others.

—From the moment they get on the air, pro gamers are exposed to the media's eyes. It will be helpful for him to practise under pressure every moment in this room.

It was an impersonal argument that made no sense even at first glance, but the sponsors accepted the director's suggestion. He even came to the practice room often to see Yoo Joonghyuk practising alone through the glass.

Yoo Joonghyuk didn't care. He was already used to being a spectacle. Most of all, he liked the fact that there were no unnecessary arguments with the team members. This was because the only person who could talk to Yoo Joonghyuk, except for Kang Woohyun, was coach Park Jinsang, who had just entered the practise room.

“Joonghyuk-ah. Let's start.”

Park Jinsang knocked on the glass door and sent a signal, and Yoo Joonghyuk nodded. He relaxed his hands and shoulders with a simple stretch, took a deep breath, and put his headphones in. The sound pushed through the earphones, and the logo of the game appeared on the monitor.

Yoo Joonghyuk's main game genre was RTS (Real-time strategy).

A game in which it's necessary to read the opponent's strategy in real time, understand the build, collect resources, and produce units to wage war. The beauty of this game was attacking with the right combination of units with the right timing, and sometimes catching the opponent off guard with a surprise attack.

—Du-du-du-du-du-du.

The sound of gunfire came through the earphones. The screen changed so quickly that the average person's eyes couldn't keep up with it. Yoo Joonghyuk was the commander of the battlefield. Each unit was under his control, and in his head, the profit and loss of this battle, the next battle, and the battle after that were being calculated in real time.

Boldly throw away what's unnecessary, and win what's necessary for victory.

The units he produced died, and someone let out a bitter cry. The monsters on the enemy side howled. The sound of the ground collapsing and the sound of structures exploding.

When the fire finally ended, Yoo Joonghyuk was looking at the sky at the centre of the ruined battlefield.

[VICTORY.]

Even when he saw the victory signs that came up every match for him, he didn't feel anything. To him, this battlefield was just a repetitive routine. There was no joy, no sadness, no anger. Just kill, die, break, lose.

Win.

Soon, the practise opponent was replaced. His condition wasn't bad. His forearm wasn't cramping. Yoo Joonghyuk sensed the opponents agitation and shook up the lead of the game. He didn't miss a gap. The match was settled cleanly without any mercy.

[VICTORY.]

After the game, a short break of less than 5 minutes was given. He continued to the next game immediately. He reminded himself of the mistakes he made in the last game, so he could make up for his weaknesses.

Winning again and again.

As easily as baking bread and making fried eggs, Yoo Joonghyuk continued the game. It was then he heard someone's voice, which he would have never heard normally.

"...Does that make sense? How could he be in such a room..."

He glanced around and saw a very slightly opened door. Two people were fighting, the noise coming in through the crack in the door. One was coach Park Jinsang.

And the other... Who was it?

Koo-gu-gu-gu!

Yoo Joonghyuk urgently looked at the situation. He'd made a mistake. The commando was defeated in a moment, the advantage given to the opponent.

—?? zzz

The practice opponent hit the chat as if mocking.

A coach's warning voice.

Yoo Joonghyuk calmly tried to make up for his mistakes, but the losses suffered were too great. It was impossible. Yoo Joonghyuk, who simulated the local battles that would occur several times, eventually decided that there was no chance of winning and ended the game.

[SURRENDER.]

Looking at the defeat screen, Yoo Joonghyuk let out a light sigh. When he took his headphones out, the noise from outside got louder.

"If you're a director, can you do whatever you want?"

He got up and went outside. He saw a troubled Park Jinsang and a bob-haired girl chattering in front of him.

"Oh, hello!"

Lightly dishevelled brown hair moved when she turned her head. It was the first time he'd seen her face.

Yoo Joonghyuk nodded slightly at her and looked at her name-tag.

New Manager Y.S.

This girl seemed to be the new recruit Kang Woohyun had mentioned.

"That... are you okay?"

Seeing the rookie ask such a question out of the blue, Yoo Joonghyuk didn't know what to answer.

"Hey, I'm sorry. This is a new manager, she doesn't know the system here yet." Park Jinsang hurriedly intervened.

Yoo Joonghyuk once again looked at the face of the newcomer. At first glance, it was a girl with clear skin and a face that appeared to be in her late teens.

Usually, people's reaction when they first met Yoo Joonghyuk was the same. Eyes wide open with surprise, or avoiding eye contact.

However, the newcomer neither averted her eyes nor became shaky. She was rather calm, as if it was natural that he was here.

“Oh, right. Are you hungry?”

The newcomer handed Yoo Joonghyuk a small paper bag. Yoo Joonghyuk looked down at the bag silently. Despite his cool expression, the newcomer continued.

“It’s dumplings. Do you like them?”

Dumplings?

Yoo Joonghyuk twitched his eyebrows.

“I don’t like them.”

“You don’t like them...”

The newcomer twitched her lips and invited him again.

“Hey, if you try it, it’ll be delicious—”

“Hey. Yoo Joonghyuk rarely eats anything other than salad and chicken breast. He says he only eats what he made. Joonghyuk-ah, let’s go eat when practice is over. Newcomer, don’t be silly, go over there and take some other kids!”

Park Jinsang pushed Yoo Joonghyuk’s back. Yoo Joonghyuk glanced at the newcomer's sullen face before heading to the employee cafeteria.

Lunch time was 50 minutes. It was a tight time frame to restore the body and brain by eating the necessary calories and doing some simple exercise.

Arriving at the cafeteria, Park Jinsang lined up to get a meal. Instead, Yoo Joonghyuk took out a lunch box he had brought in that morning.

Park Jinsang smiled bitterly at Yoo Joonghyuk.

“I’ll go get some rice.”

While Park Jinsang waited in line with a tray, several players passed Yoo Joonghyuk’s table.

Looking at their faces, they were players who had played in the practice game with him. Some of them glared at him and whispered amongst themselves. It was familiar, so Yoo Joonghyuk ate his lunch without paying them any attention.

In fact, there was a story behind Yoo Joonghyuk’s insistence on bringing lunch.

During the last game of last season, Yoo Joonghyuk got food poisoning after eating the rice prepared by the company. The agency pointed out that only Yoo Joonghyuk was sick and insisted that they weren’t responsible, but no matter how much he thought about it, Yoo Joonghyuk had no memory of eating anything other than that meal that day.

Yoo Joonghyuk had been packing lunches since that day.

“Bon appetit.”

When he lifted his head, the new girl was suddenly sitting opposite him. She was eating the dumplings she had offered him. Yoo Joonghyuk responded bluntly.

“Food isn’t for enjoyment, but for living.”

“Eating delicious food makes life better.”

After saying that, the newcomer sighed and ate another dumpling. He hadn’t noticed at first glance, but the moderately elastic dumpling skin and the well-filled filling stood out as high quality. The shape of it was also not of ordinary skill.

“Did you make it yourself?”
“You too... Would you like to share?”
“No, I don’t like them.”
“If you take a bite, you might feel better.”
“I don’t have to eat it to know.”
“But, ahjussi.”

Yoo Joonghyuk paused for a moment before answering.

“I’m not an ahjussi.”
“Then what should I call you?”

Yoo Joonghyuk had never been asked that question before. Honorifics were a matter for the person saying them to worry about. Depending on what they called him, Yoo Joonghyuk could also determine his attitude towards the other person. However, the newcomer in front of him was telling Yoo Joonghyuk to decide for himself.

“Call me Yoo Joonghyuk-seonsu¹.”
“Yoo Joonghyuk-seonsu...”

The newcomer muttered quietly, then suddenly took out a notebook and started writing something down.

“What is that?”
“It’s nothing.”
“What are you doing?”
“I just think there are a lot of people who would like that... I can’t tell anyone if I forget.”

The newcomer made a scratching sound as she filled up her notebook. Watching the hard-to-see letters fill the paper, Yoo Joonghyuk thought about what he remembered.

If he had kept a diary, would he remember the past?

His forearm cramped up, then a faint tinnitus filled his mind. A feeling of choking, as if water had entered his lungs.

He saw a white wall filling his surroundings. A solid, high wall that he could neither break nor overcome. The sound of a pen tip coming from beyond the wall.

Crunch.

Someone was writing something on the wall. But he couldn’t read the sentences. Words there like hidden comments that he’ll never be able to read.

“Yoo Joonghyuk-seonsu?”

When he suddenly came to his senses, the newcomer was looking at him worriedly.

“Are you okay?”
“I’m okay.”
“Are you doing okay?”

¹ Seonsu – Player.

Yoo Joonghyuk looked at her notebook, then her worried face. To Yoo Joonghyuk, the inside of a person was as difficult to read as the writing on the other side of the wall. However, it was an expression that even Yoo Joonghyuk could read.

The newcomer was worried about him.

Yoo Joonghyuk replied honestly.

“Don’t worry.”

He felt a little regret after answering with that. She had clearly just asked out of politeness. It wasn’t a question to be answered truthfully.

But the newcomer had a calm face. Yoo Joonghyuk’s answer seemed to be too natural or too familiar.

At that time, someone patted Yoo Joonghyuk on the shoulder and sat next to him.

“What, are you talking to the rookie?”

It was Park Jinsang. Seeing that the rice on his plate was half gone, he must have come after talking with the other players.

Park Jinsang, who was looking between Yoo Joonghyuk and the newcomer as if it was a big deal, smirked.

“You’re going to bother Joonghyuk from day one? Would you cut it out?”

Pretending not to hear, the newcomer opened her mouth wide and bit into a dumpling. Park Jinsang clicked his tongue.

“Kids these days. Anyway, Joonghyuk-ah, the director left a comment after watching the practice this morning.”

Thinking about it, he remembered that he forgot to get feedback in the morning. Today, the coach said he was away early because of scheduling.

Yoo Joonghyuk nodded and Park Jinsang started talking.

“He said he couldn’t watch the game because he didn’t have time. The buildup and strategy were good, and the feedback from last time was well reflected. But—”

The director was a pretty precise person, except for his picky personality. Yoo Joonghyuk also acknowledged it. Strictly speaking, he was a director recognised by the world without needing to be acknowledged. For every anniversary, the legendary esports stars he raised sent gifts.

“Play tends to be rather predictable. Textbook builds are overused and the anomalies are weak. And above all...”

It was the same feedback as always. The speed is fast and the response is sure. However, he says flexibility is poor, or that it doesn’t deviate greatly from the typical play trajectory. The last point of feedback was always similar.

“The play has no soul.”

There is no soul. Whenever Yoo Joonghyuk heard that feedback, he asked himself whether it was a problem that could be solved.

Yoo Joonghyuk didn’t believe in a soul.

Soul. He hadn't seen it before, but he thought it was a good idea not to say such a thing. The human being he thought of was a being that eats when it's hungry and sleeps when it's sleepy. It produces as much energy as it needs to move, think, and live. That was all of the humans that Yoo Joonghyuk knew.

To him, the director's words, "There is no soul," felt like a self-made, incomprehensible poem rather than advice.

"There's no soul in play? What does that mean?"

It was the newcomer who asked. Park Jinsang replied.

"Well, it's just an idiomatic expression. It's like, 'I don't feel the enthusiasm or persistence'. This guy just quits the game if he doesn't see a reversal angle."

In fact, it wasn't just the director who had made that comment. There were fans that called Yoo Joonghyuk 'AI', due to how he was always so quick to judge if he had won or lost. However, the expression of the newcomer was strange. Park Jinsang pursed his lips and asked.

"Why are you laughing? Are my words funny?"

"A little?"

"What?"

"No, nothing."

Park Jinsang glared at the newcomer for a while before looking at Yoo Joonghyuk again.

"Anyway, don't listen to his words too much. The director doesn't know you, so how much would he know? They're all trying to bully you. The person who put you in that room is also the director."

Park Jinsang started with those words and cursed the director. It stretched out for a long time. Things like, 'why is it all the foreign directors that are managing Koreans, it's the coaches who do all the practical work'.

As the gossip continued until his plate was empty, the newcomer stood up, shaking her head as if tired of it. As the players around them left their seats one by one, the coach spoke in a lower voice than before.

"Kids these days have no fear."

Park Jinsang was looking at the back of the newcomer's head with cold eyes. It was a dull voice, as if he had put on another mask in an instant.

"She'd be horrified to know what you and I went through."

Looking at Park Jinsang's shadowy eyes, Yoo Joonghyuk realised this was his main topic.

"See you in the coach's office."

【...Because. Can you believe it?!】

【That... I think it's a little cute.】

【.....Unnie, really...】

After the afternoon schedule, Yoo Joonghyuk went to the coach's office. Park Jinsang leaned back in the executive chair and proudly put his feet on the table.

"You know? This was my original seat."

Team Ash's coaching was a last-minute parachute put in by one of the sponsors. In fact, Park Jinsang was unfair. Park Jinsang had a big part in gathering the main members of Team Ash and putting the team in the major leagues.

"Can you believe it? All we've done in the past three years."

Park Jinsang smiled and pointed to the team trophies in the exhibition hall. Looking back at the line of trophies, Yoo Joonghyuk also recalled the short past. Proof of the path Team Ash had walked, from the time the team was created until now. At the end of the road was Yoo Joonghyuk's own name.

64 wins, 5 losses, 1 draw.
MVP OVERLORD Yoo Joonghyuk

A plaque that he received at the same time as the team's championship win. Two years ago, Yoo Joonghyuk suddenly became a star in the esports world.

"Joonghyuk-ah. I don't talk outside because the kids notice."

Park Jinsang sighed lightly and took a cigarette out of his pocket, putting it in his mouth. As the acrid smoke filled the room, the exhaust fan on the ceiling turned furiously.

"Let's do it well."

Park Jinsang, exhaling smoke, was a completely different person from the one he saw at lunch. The cheeky smile in his eyes disappeared, replaced with a face with a deep cold and dark shadows.

"You know what's going on these days, right? I... How did we get here? Have we already forgotten?

Even the habit of holding someone else's shoulder on occasion. In fact, that appearance is not the true face of Park Jinsang that Yoo Joonghyuk knew.

Coach Park Jinsang.
He was not originally a figure in the esports industry. He operated private gambling halls and illegal sites. The so-called 'big hand in the workplace' had been exploiting hired foreign workers for money in illegally expanded buildings. Nobody knew Park Jinsang's workplace among the dark gamers who spent their money that way.

"Do you want to go back to those days? Do you want to earn game money while eating cup noodles in the basement?"

As he was thinking about Park Jinsang's career, memories of his late teens that he had completely forgotten about came to mind one by one. From that time on, Yoo Joonghyuk's life was with this man.

“Who discovered you? Me. I’m the one who recommended you, and now you’re here. It was me. But if you’re in this shape, how does it reflect on me?”

Park Jinsang was a bad person. But it was clear that he first recognised Yoo Joonghyuk’s talent for gaming and brought him out of the prison-like basement.

“I’ll try.”

“You’ll try? I know. I know Joonghyuk is always working hard. But try it in a few different ways. Make your expressions lighter and speak a bit... can’t you? You can’t shoot any ads that come through with that face.”

Park Jinsang sighed heavily and lit another cigarette.

“Anyway, that’s it, and the reason I called today is something else. Tomorrow is the last game before the playoffs, right?”

Park Jinsang, instead of continuing his speech, tapped the table with his eyebrows furrowed. Yoo Joonghyuk remembered Park Jinsang’s habit. One day, on the first day that he saw him and President Kim’s workplace, Park Jinsang was looking at Yoo Joonghyuk, furrowing his eyebrows for a long time. The very next day, he bought Yoo Joonghyuk from President Kim. The first day he bought Yoo Joonghyuk, Park Jinsang said this.

—You must never lose from now on.

And now, Park Jinsang said with the exact same expression.

“I need you to lose just one game.”

Lose.

“I’m not saying just lose it, you know, you know that. As in, ‘I did my best, but unfortunately it ended like that.’ Right?”

Yoo Joonghyuk answered instinctively, trying not to think about the meaning of those words.

“I remember rejecting that offer last time.”

“So, how much trouble should I be in right now? No more, no less, just one game. Did you see tomorrow’s entry? I’ve made an agreement with the other kids.”

“I’ve never signed a losing contract.”

“Contract? ‘My hyung asks me to do him a favour, but I didn’t sign a contract’...”

Yoo Joonghyuk took a quick glance at the door of the coach’s office and observed Park Jinsang’s expression. The atmosphere was getting more and more unusual. In fact, Yoo Joonghyuk knew what Park Jinsang was talking about.

The reason why Team Ash’s performance lately had been particularly sluggish.

It wasn’t just because of Yoo Joonghyuk’s deteriorating condition, or the coach’s incompetence. It was because of Park Jinsang right in front of him.

Park Jinsang took out a new cigarette. It was a different kind of cigarette than what he had before. When the cigarette lit up, Park Jinsang spoke.

“Don’t make a mistake, Joonghyuk-ah.”

Park Jinsang.
Team Ash's coach.
And the match-fixing broker behind the scenes of the esports industry.
Park Jinsang didn't bring him here to recognise Yoo Joonghyuk's talent.

"I told you 700 million won. Do you know how much money that is?"

He knew. 700 million is his two-year salary... It was more than the amount of money that had entered Park Jinsang's back pocket for two years.

"Think carefully. The market isn't very good these days. Everyone is moving to AOS, so the league is talking about the end. You and I can't end like this. I have my own family to be responsible for, and you should also think about Mia."

If 700 million won comes in for him alone, the actual amount of capital flowing in and out will be much larger.

Most likely, the commission that Park Jinsang would receive would be at least 2 billion won. Considering that the board will grow overseas, it could be a case of tens of billions of won or more. Seeing the 11-year-old wrinkle between Park Jinsang's forehead, Yoo Joonghyuk thought about that number for a moment.

What you can do with 700 million won.

Instead of the old accommodation provided by the agency, he could try and find a private house on the outskirts of Seoul. He would be able to send his little sister to a daycare center a little closer and buy her new clothes. He could take her to the doctor more often.
And maybe, he wasn't sure how much the agency's costs were, but—
Maybe he could find his parents.

But.

"I got food poisoning during the match last season."

A cold, subdued voice. Park Jinsang, who knows what kind of state Yoo Joonghyuk was in when he talked about this kind of money, nodded his head instead of pointing out Yoo Joonghyuk's tone.

"Was it you?"

At that time, the day before the game, Yoo Joonghyuk was asked to lose the match. Yoo Joonghyuk refused, and the next day, his upset stomach was so severe, he couldn't play properly. He lost the ace match, and the team also lost.

"You should have said no."

Park Jinsang sighed lightly and said.

"Can't you just think like usual? You quit playing easily because it's a game that's difficult to win and you're retiring because it's a game with no odds."

"I never quit easily. I always do my best."

Park Jinsang glared at Yoo Joonghyuk as if he really didn't understand. He saw his face, his old coat, and the lunchbox in his hand. Then, nervously shaking off the cigarette ash, he said,

“Joonghyuk-ah, does a dog become human just because he eats dog food, then eats human food?”

Yoo Joonghyuk recalled the scene of a black, prison-like basement.

There, he played games under someone else's ID, made money, and raised their rankings. In return for raising someones number, Park Jinsang earned money. With the money, Yoo Joonghyuk ate. But he couldn't live like that anymore. He was no longer alone, and he was a man who could earn even a small amount of money with dignity.

However, Park Jinsang didn't seem to think so.

“You come out like that when your hyung says this? Do you lose faith in others like this? That's why you're being criticised by people both inside and outside.”

Park Jinsang, who lit a cigarette, stood up with a grim look. Then Yoo Joonghyuk's cold eyes looked back at Park Jinsang.

Like predators trying not to step back from their territory, the two stared at each other for a long time. It was Park Jinsang who first broke the tension that seemed as if it could explode at any moment.

“I get it, I get it.”

Park Jinsang's face, smiling lightly, had changed to that of the coach before he knew it. He waved his hands as if he was annoyed.

“Okay, so stop it.”

Yoo Joonghyuk looked at Park Jinsang for a while, then turned around and left the room.

Ever after Yoo Joonghyuk disappeared, Park Jinsang continued to burn through cigarettes. By the time an ashtray had turned into a hedgehog, Park Jinsang stood up with a bad laugh.

Park Jinsang immediately opened up his cell phone and called somewhere.

“Hey, the student is really handsome.”

The taxi driver kept talking all the way home. It was often that way when taking a taxi.

“Me too in the past.”

Even though Yoo Joonghyuk didn't respond, the taxi driver continued to freely chatter. Yoo Joonghyuk let him talk freely.

“People don't know, it's hard to be handsome.”

Yoo Joonghyuk looked at his face reflected in the window. Perhaps the only legacy left by his parents. His good looks helped him somehow make ends meet.

Yoo Joonghyuk was not really convinced that he could like or dislike someone based solely on their appearance. So Yoo Joonghyuk couldn't quite understand why he should express gratitude when someone complimented his appearance.

“Thank you.”

After a brief answer, he got out of the taxi. A torrent of rain was pouring from the gloomy sky. He entered the security code and went into the house. The living room light was off. Yoo Joonghyuk paused for a moment before opening his mouth.

“Yoo Mia.”

But there was no response. Yoo Joonghyuk picked up an umbrella like a weapon under the faint light of the sensors.

“Kang Woohyun.”

Still no answer. There was no one in the house, or they were pretending that no one was there. Had it ever been that way before? In an instant, several possibilities passed his mind. Yoo Joonghyuk decided to check it out himself.

He hid in the darkness of the living room, making as little noise as possible. He pricked his ears, but all he heard was the noise of the fridge. There was no sign of life at all.

Yoo Joonghyuk stopped being vigilant and turned on the light, looking around the house. In the first place, it wasn't a large flat, there wasn't much to search. Two rooms, bathroom, veranda, in the closet. Yoo Mia was nowhere to be found.

He immediately called Kang Woohyun. He didn't answer the phone. The same was true even if he left a voicemail or text.

Yoo Joonghyuk calmly assessed the situation.

Kang Woohyun decided to take care of Yoo Mia for a while.

Yoo Mia is gone.

Kang Woohyun can't be contacted.

Yoo Joonghyuk examined the traces left inside the house. There was no sign of a meal left at the table. However, the remaining dishes and stains in the sink indicated that someone had finished washing the dishes and arranged the tableware.

In the living room, there were board games and story books that Yoo Mia was supposed to play with.

The slightly off-turned sofa and Yoo Mia's shoes gone.

Yoo Joonghyuk checked the remaining warmth of the sofa, and then ran out of the house with the umbrella in his hand.

Beyond the bright street lights was an alleyway. Even though there was a road there, the environment was quiet and distant, like the darkness of an undiscovered steppe.

Yoo Joonghyuk slowly looked up both sides of the alley. He thought of places Yoo Mia might have headed. Yoo Mia liked large supermarkets. She liked convenience stores. She liked fast food. She liked the playground.

Yoo Mia... His little sister.

He entered the surrounding terrain into his mind. He decided to search the area Yoo Mia would like the best.

“Yoo Mia!”

She wouldn't have gone far.

She had never been out alone before. Compared to her peers, her language development was delayed. She struggled with pronunciation and didn't know many words. She wouldn't have gone far.

Yoo Joonghyuk walked at a brisk pace towards the supermarket and looked into the entrance of the surrounding alley.

“Answer me if you can hear! Yoo Mia!”

It was late, and the students secretly smoking in the alleyway avoided Yoo Joonghyuk’s gaze. He saw men drinking alcohol. Yoo Joonghyuk grabbed one of the drunk middle-aged men with displeasure and asked.

“Have you seen her?”

He wasn’t used to having conversations like this with strangers, so Yoo Joonghyuk lightly breathed in and sorted out what it was he wanted to say.

“A girl. She is about 68cm tall, has her hair tied in two pigtails, and often wears light blue clothes. She looks very similar to me.”

The drunkard, perhaps unaware of Yoo Joonghyuk’s strange tone of voice, rolled his eyes and fell on the table. Yoo Joonghyuk looked down at the drunk for a moment. He grabbed another person around him and asked.

“Huh, a girl? I didn’t see her.”

No one had seen Yoo Mia anywhere. Yoo Joonghyuk saw reeds sprouting on the side of the road. There was a park with low grasses outside the road, so if she went there, someone would have found her. Yoo Joonghyuk saw the end of the road where the reeds grew. The exterior of a supermarket, dimly visible in the distant darkness. Even so, did she walk all the way there? Could she have been walking?
Yoo Joonghyuk started running.

“Yoo Mia... Yoo Mia!”

How long did he run? Yoo Joonghyuk reached in front of the supermarket before he knew it. The supermarket was somewhere they visited regularly. There was nowhere he hadn’t checked on the way. Convenience stores, fast food stores, stationery stores, the playground, and alleys behind them were all examined. He felt like a fog was gathering in his head.

No one had ever told him what to do in this situation.

In order to raise a child alone, Yoo Joonghyuk studied various things. He searched the internet and read books. He bought the necessary preparations for childcare.

The attitude needed to raise a child. How not to create bad habits. Education methods to instill the right values in children.

Some books he didn’t understand even after finishing them, and some books wrote about methods he couldn’t do even if he understood them. Some books made him realise what he had never received from his parents, and some books made him realise that he could never replace them.

Still, he did what he could and got here.

But no book told him how to deal with this situation.

Think of it as a game.

Yoo Joonghyuk muttered to himself.

This is a game. The only thing he was good at. The goal is to find Yoo Mia. Think simple. Don't panic, what can you do now...

Think.

But the more he thought about it, the more his thoughts got messed up.

A game could be abandoned at any time if there was no chance of winning. Even if you lose one game, the next game remains. But if he loses this game, what does he lose?

His heart started beating fast. Yoo Joonghyuk ran like crazy and shouted Yoo Mia's name. A chill slowly circulated in his forearm. He felt the odds of winning decrease in real time. It felt like playing a game that was scheduled for defeat with an unknown opponent.

It was a game that shouldn't be given up.

He suddenly felt like he shouldn't be alone. He had to ask someone for help. As he thought about it, he felt guilty for not reporting it right away. However, as soon as he took the phone in his hand, Yoo Joonghyuk realised why he hadn't reported it.

—If possible, it would be better not to inform the outside world.

One day, Kang Woohyun said something like that.

—If they find out that you're raising your little sister alone, there will be a lot of difficult things.

—What difficult things.

—There is also a problem with the truth. When you picked her up, there was only a letter left, and no genetic test.

—Judging by her appearance, she is my younger sister.

—That's true, but you don't know. If she really is your sister, or you have a complicated family situation...

—...

—If that's the case, where will this poor child go after that? I will help you as much as possible, so let's not publicise this matter to the outside world where possible.

Yoo Joonghyuk called the police. The police didn't answer the phone. Why was it? The second time he called, it was the same. The third call, the police finally answered the phone.

Yoo Joonghyuk said his little sister was missing. He gave his name, his sister's name, and her age. And...

—What are your parent's names? The date of birth of the child...

“Date of birth...”

Why is it? He didn't remember. Yoo Joonghyuk tried to remember Yoo Mia's date of birth again and again.

—What is your address? Where...

“The address is...”

It felt like someone had cleverly erased his memory.

Yoo Joonghyuk slowly looked back. The road he ran was buried in darkness. He had always walked that road. On the way back after shopping, holding Yoo Mia's hand. But why?

The road home suddenly felt strange.

The police asked if he could come right away. They said they needed to know more about his younger sister and how she disappeared.

But the moment he heard it, Yoo Joonghyuk thought he wouldn't be able to find his sister.

His sister who disappeared.

A child who looks just like him. A child whose face and name he doesn't know, left in front of his house as if falling out of the sky.

"I'll call back."

Yoo Joonghyuk hung up and ran back the way he had come.

He didn't know. She might be standing in a nearby alley that he passed without seeing. She might be wandering the neighbourhood alone, wandering back to the house.

"Yoo Mia!"

He needed help from someone other than the police.

A person who knows him.

Someone who instead of wondering who she is and where she came from, will find his little sister who may be wandering around here.

The names of people who he knew randomly emerged in his head. Kang Woohyun. Park Jinsang.

The face of his unfamiliar manager and the names of players also flashed through his mind. For a moment, he also remembered the face of the new manager he met that morning.

The environment swayed with his shaky breaths.

Yoo Joonghyuk groped in the darkness and hurried his steps.

Was it here, or was it this way...

He'd been staring into the darkness for a long time. Little by little, his sense of reality was lost.

The scenery of the basement-like workplace was similar to this. Hundreds of chairs were lined up without numbers in the large, square workshop. President Kim told him that he could sit anywhere, and from that day on, Yoo Joonghyuk would sit down anywhere and play the game.

'Anywhere' was his place.

"Yoo Mia!"

The faint smell of urine from stray cats wafted in.

Watching the pitch-black abyss spread out into the alley, Yoo Joonghyuk felt like he was back in the basement-like workshop.

Park Jinsang was right. There was no way I could become someone else just by eating something else.

He held his breath against the wall for a while. It wasn't just that he was dizzy because he had exhausted a lot of energy. His vision was blurry as if he had been drugged, and his body felt heavy as if he had become a child.

Was it fatigue due to the recent excessive schedules? Like Mia said, was it because he ate too much salad? Or had Park Jinsang secretly added something to his food?

But it couldn't be. Because he had no recollection of eating anything Park Jinsang gave him. Then, when the hell... He suddenly thought of the coach's room, when Park Jinsang had blown smoke at him.

Cigarette smoke.

Smoke covered his vision with a cough.

When he blinked again, he was in a familiar landscape. The smell of rotten food and unwashed sweat everywhere.

It was the basement-like workshop run by President Kim.

Only then did he feel it. This was still his reality.

He hadn't taken a single step out of the ring.

Yoo Mia disappeared.

He would never see her again.

Yoo Joonghyuk sat down in a chair in the workshop as if it were all a dream. Then the chair next to him swivelled and someone grabbed his shoulder.

“Ahjussi.”

Looking to his side, there was a boy in his late teens with tattoos on his arm. Looking closely at his face, it was one of the guys who was smoking in the alley.

“Ahjussi, we're talking to you. Can't you hear me?”

“Huh? This dog is handsome?”

“Doesn't it seem like you've seen him somewhere? Isn't it a celebrity?”

“Dongsan-ah, he only looks handsome because it's dark.”

The children surrounded Yoo Joonghyuk while whispering amongst themselves. Among them, a boy who seemed to be the leader talked to Yoo Joonghyuk. He was as big as Yoo Joonghyuk.

“Ahjussi. Go to the convenience store in front of you and get the same thing as this one. Please buy only one pack. You can have the money left over.”

The child proudly held out a red cigarette pack and ten thousand won together. Yoo Joonghyuk looked down at it from a distance. When he refused to take the money, the boy tapped Yoo Joonghyuk on the shoulder.

“Hey, ahjussi, are you deaf?”

Yoo Joonghyuk laughed lightly.

“You're laughing?”

The face of the boy who raised his fist was distorted. Regardless, Yoo Joonghyuk laughed. All his sense of reality was shattering.

“(This comment has been hidden due to reporting.)”

The boy muttered and swung his fist. But no voice was heard.

“(This comment has been hidden due to reporting.)”

But Yoo Joonghyuk was no longer curious about those words.

Yoo Joonghyuk slowly closed his eyes. It occurred to him that there was nothing in this life that could surprise him. Even if the world ended tomorrow, he wouldn't be surprised.
Right now, no matter what happened right in front of his—
It was then that a silver needle popped into the child's neck with a sound.
The boy looked at his neck with eyes full of disbelief and twisted forward.
Yoo Joonghyuk blinked his eyes.

“(This comment has been hidden due to reporting.)”

The children who were watching the situation from behind screamed.
A few who came to their senses belatedly looked around and shouted fiercely.

“(This comment has been hidden due to reporting!)”
“(This comment has been hidden due to reporting!)”

Once again, he heard that sound. Silver needles were stuck in the children's necks.
Again. And again.

“(This comment has been hidden due to reporting!)”
“(This comment has been hidden due to reporting!)”

All the children collapsed at the last needle, and the cigarette smoke that surrounded him disappeared.
He thought his environment was slowly changing, and when he blinked again, Yoo Joonghyuk was standing at the beginning of a dead end alley. After gagging lightly, he looked up and saw two shadows walking under the street light. Surprisingly, their words came out clearly.

“All dead.”
“Oh my no, they've fainted. Do you know what 'fainted' means?”

A familiar voice.
The light of the street lamp was dazzling. As he opened his eyes, he saw one large and one small king dumpling standing beyond the crossing. Perhaps it was because of the cold, warm steam was rising above the dumplings.
The little king dumpling said.

“No traffic lights. It's dangerous.”
“It's okay. Pedestrians have priority. Just hold my hand and walk with me.”

A soft and elegant voice, like the sound of snow piling up. As soon as he saw the white seaweed scattered under the dim lights, Yoo Joonghyuk realised that it was pure white hair.
The woman grabbed the hand of the small dumpling and approached Yoo Joonghyuk. Finally, the small dumpling, who discovered Yoo Joonghyuk, pointed to him and said.

“Obabunny.”

Yoo Joonghyuk closed his eyes.

【Is it okay to intervene this far? If ■■-ahjussi or ■■-unnie finds out about this...】
【Hmm... Actually, those people would like it.】

Yoo Joonghyuk doesn't believe in miracles. Everything in life is the result of the hard work, the result of the life you have lived.

However, there was no way to explain what had happened to Yoo Joonghyuk that day, other than saying it was a miracle.

When he woke up feeling like he'd slept poorly, he found Yoo Mia sleeping peacefully by his side.

Was it a dream?

If it was a dream, it was a very strange dream. The images of cigarette smoke and the king dumplings barely came to mind.

Yoo Joonghyuk opened his phone, rubbing his temples from the oncoming headache.

—54 missed calls

There were a lot of calls left for him.

"Obabunny. Come on."

Yoo Mia opened her eyes at the sound of rustling.

Yoo Joonghyuk slowly looked around. A messy house. He asked Yoo Mia about what happened yesterday.

It was difficult to understand, but in summary, it was as follows,

"I woke up in a strange park, and a woman with white hair was taking care of me."

"And?"

"Beeza."

"Beeza?"

"I ate the beeza. The cheese was soooooo stretchy."

It seemed like she was talking about pizza.

"Nice unnie."

Yoo Joonghyuk remembered the woman with the dumplings he had seen in his dream last night.

A woman who stuck a needle into a group of smoking teenagers.

Why was that woman there? Why did she save him?

Why did she carry such a needle?

What is certain is that she took him back to this house with Yoo Mia.

He didn't even know her name, but judging from the circumstances, it didn't seem like the woman had kidnapped or harassed Yoo Mia.

Yoo Joonghyuk sighed and said.

"She's not a good person just for giving you pizza. In the future, I won't—"

"No. Nice unnie."

"Why did you go to the park?"

"Woke up there."

“What’s your last memory before going to sleep?”

“Manager-ahjussi.”

Before meeting the woman, Yoo Mia’s last memory was sleeping on the couch after eating dinner given to her by Kang Woohyun.

Yoo Joonghyuk opened his cell phone again. Amongst the messages from angry coaches, he saw a familiar name. Kang Woohyun.

—Joonghyuk-ah. I am so sorry.

He called right away, but Kang Woohyun didn’t answer his phone.

What are you sorry for? Not taking good care of Mia?

Or was it suddenly disappearing and losing contact?

If that’s not the case...

How the hell did that woman find Mia?

—You just have to lose one game.

Yoo Joonghyuk organised his thoughts while making a simple salad for breakfast.

Last night, Kang Woohyun disappeared with Yoo Mia.

Today is the last game before the playoffs.

Park Jinsang wants him to throw today’s game.

“Yoo Mia. You’re coming with me today.”

“Oh no! I want to dance the Hokey Pokey at daycare today.”

“Not today.”

He wouldn’t be able to bring Yoo Mia to the match, but he’d find a way.

Yoo Joonghyuk recalled the face of the newcomer yesterday.

“Again?”

While feeding the grouchy Yoo Mia salad and fried eggs, Yoo Joonghyuk checked the time. Even if he rushed, it would be too late. Would he make it on time?

—You, where are you now?

The call was neither Park Jinsang or Kang Woohyun, but another team coach. It wasn’t a name he remembered, so Yoo Joonghyuk replied casually.

“Home.”

The coach had a tantrum.

—Did you quit? Why are you not answering your phone like this? Are you protesting that your manager quit? We haven’t even started yet.

“Did Kang Woohyun quit?”

—What? He didn’t say anything to you?

Yoo Joonghyuk thought for a moment before he replied that he didn't know. Then the coach sighed, and added.

—I sent in another player as soon as possible. Come quickly, we're running out of time!

Then the coach hung up before Yoo Joonghyuk could answer. Immediately after the phone call, the doorbell rang. A familiar figure was waving over the intercom.

【I thought you liked dumplings since you were born.】

“Ah, were you eating? Excuse me.”

The newcomer came into the house on her own and took a close look at Yoo Joonghyuk's salad.

“Um... Do you really eat like this? Wouldn't it be better to feed her with more variety in her meals?”

“Beeza.”

“Pizza? Do you want some pizza?”

The newcomer stroked Yoo Mia's head as if she was cute. Yoo Joonghyuk narrowed his eyes and said.

“There is no time to procrastinate.”

“I parked the car outside. You can leave right away.”

The newcomer smiled softly and gestured towards the two. After preparing, Yoo Joonghyuk hugged Yoo Mia and they rode in the back seat together. The newcomer started the car. It was somewhat awkward.

“Hmm, let's go.”

Yoo Joonghyuk quickly checked the entry for today's game. It was already time for the first game to begin, but in terms of entry, he was fifth in line. However, since he was fifth, the game could have already been lost before his turn came around.

No. That won't happen.

In a match like this, Park Jinsang would have arranged for the win or loss to be decided in the last game of the round, with a tie score of 2:2, as usual. There was a possibility he had already bought players from the opposing team as well.

Yoo Joonghyuk glared at the back of the newcomer's head, even as she was driving.

“What's your name?”

“Me? Um... Would you have a look at my jacket?”

The newcomer pointed to the jacket hanging on the passenger seat. A name tag hung from the pocket.

Manager Y.S.

Yoo Joonghyuk replied.

“These are the initials.”

“Haha. Yes... Can you guess my name until we arrive?”

Y.S.... YS.

Yoo Joonghyuk thought for a while and said.

“Yoosong.”²

The newcomer was silent for a moment, then replied.

“It’s a name similar to that.”

Yoo Joonghyuk shook his head.

“Do you hate giving out your name?”

“Yes. I hate giving out my name.”

The car exited the alley and went straight into the main street. However, she hardly ever got up to speed. In particular, after getting to the bridge, they almost came to a standstill.

“The traffic across the river is too heavy. It would be faster to swim across.”

“Then why don’t you do that?”

“Should we swim? Or we could ride a fish.”

Yoo Joonghyuk didn’t know what the newcomer was talking about. Before he was questioning whether or not she was Park Jinsang’s helper, but now he was more suspicious of whether she had basic common sense.

Messages from the coach continued to blow up his phone.

—Where are you?

Yoo Joonghyuk looked down at Yoo Mia sleeping on his thigh and calculated the remaining time left on their route. Even if it was a little late, it seemed like he could arrive before his game time. Traffic congestion tended to ease at the end of the boulevard. As expected, after that section—
With a squealing sound, a black sedan cut the car off on either side.
The newcomer muttered.

“Eh... annoying.”

Cars jammed in front and behind obstructed their way, prolonging the time. Thanks to that, they were stuck in the congested traffic where they could have passed a moment ago.

It felt too awkward to be a coincidence.

The rookie asked.

“Does another person hold a grudge against you?”

...Another?

Yoo Joonghyuk thought for a moment and replied.

² He guessed Yoosong (유성, yuseong). Shin Yoosung’s name is uses a different second character (유승, yuseung)

“I don’t know.”

“I think they do.”

Tap-tap.

Someone was tapping at the window.

“It’s none of my business.”

“There’s someone with a grudge.”

Men in black suits surrounded the car on both sides.

They spoke as they surrounded the exit from the back seat of the car.

Get out.

It was clear from the shape of his mouth that he said that. He didn’t know why they asked him to get out, but he didn’t have the charm to get out and make this look good.

At this point, it was clear who had sent them.

But no matter how bad Park Jinsang was, he’d never thought he would go this far.

That must mean this gambling board was huge.

The moment Yoo Joonghyuk opened his mouth, his face hardened—

“Hold tight.”

The car accelerated rapidly as she said it. Embarrassed men in suits shouted something from behind. The newcomer, who made distance in an instant, quickly turned into an alley and changed into a new lane.

The newcomer said.

“Should we go to the police station? I don’t think it’s really the time to go to the game.”

Yoo Joonghyuk looked at her without a word. The newcomer continued.

“Or... Should we go far away?”

He couldn’t read the newcomer’s expression in the rear-view mirror. He still had doubts about her. Still, his heart was shaken by her words.

“Do you want to go to the Han River? The pizza you eat there is delicious.”

“Beeza...”

Yoo Joonghyuk tightly held Yoo Mia’s hand as she sleep-talked. If it was Park Jinsang who had sent the newcomer, she would have just opened the door when the men in suits surrounded them earlier.

“Have you heard anything?”

“I see and hear a lot, all the time. Anyway, right now it’s good to go as far away as you can, right? Anywhere is better than here.”

Yoo Joonghyuk looked down at Yoo Mia, who was still mumbling in her sleep.

The rookie was right. It was a situation where a person with common sense would have run away.

Went to the police and asked for protection, or at least hidden in a place where they could be safe.

At least, if this was all Park Jinsang's work, his purpose was clear. To prevent Yoo Joonghyuk from playing in today's game.

Then, as long as he doesn't go to the stadium, he'll be safe.

"I'm going to the stadium."

"Why?"

Yoo Joonghyuk didn't know what he was good at. If there was a god who made this world, there would be a list on which the god wrote down his specialities.

But the list wouldn't be long.

He often heard that he had a good face, but he had no talent to be a singer, actor, or entertainer. He couldn't sing or dress well, he couldn't act, and he didn't know how to match people's moods. Even when reporters took pictures, he had a habit of frowning, making it difficult to take a good shot.

But at least there was one thing Yoo Joonghyuk knew he was good at.

"Obabunny is a gamer. He's the best when playing games."

Yoo Mia woke up and said.

The newcomer was silent. Yoo Joonghyuk also kept quiet. All they could hear was the noise of the engine.

Normally in this situation, no one would make such a choice.

However, he wasn't born as a normal human being.

He had little memory of his childhood, and didn't know the faces of his parents. He didn't know why he was abandoned, or when. But he was alone, grew up alone, and came here.

Yoo Joonghyuk stroked Yoo Mia's head and continued.

"I should be there. At least for now."

When a player ran away from a game, they broke the trust of their teammates. In the past, gossip had already piled up and he was hated by the association and within the team. If he ran away now, his life as a pro gamer was over.

If that happened, he wouldn't be able to take care of Mia.

Even if he did run away and was safe for a while, what would he do next? Park Jinsang might suggest match-fixing to him again. He wouldn't hesitate to inflict harm on him once again.

He couldn't hide like this every time.

Perhaps it was possible to explain to the new manager. He could ask for understanding and speak calmly. Although he had only known her for two days, he thought there was a possibility that she would understand him because she was a sweeter and kinder person than he thought.

However, Yoo Joonghyuk wasn't the type of person who hoped for such a miracle twice. So,

"I'm going to the stadium."

That's all Yoo Joonghyuk could say. Then the newcomer said.

"That's how you protect the world."

How to protect the world.

He'd never heard anyone talk that way. It was a phrase that would appear in a story.

The newcomer continued.

“But ahjussi.”

“...?”

“You might stop playing games someday.”

I was about to ask what she was talking about, but she kept talking.

“If that happens, what do you want to do then?”

“I’ve never thought about it.”

“You should think about it in advance. Is there anything you want to do after retirement?”

“Retirement is far away.”

“The world could be destroyed tomorrow.”

For some reason, Yoo Joonghyuk found it hard to keep up with the pace of the conversation. Regardless, the newcomer continued.

“A bunch of monsters could suddenly appear and destroy Seoul.”

“There will still be games.”

The newcomer looked at him with disbelieving eyes.

“Maybe, but... If that happens, wouldn’t there be a lot of other things to do besides games?”

Yoo Joonghyuk thought for a moment about her words.

A world in which the world was truly destroyed, where no one played games, and real life was like a game. A world infested with monsters.

It felt unfamiliar.

Yoo Joonghyuk recalled the darkness of the basement-like workshop. No one was playing games there. Yoo Joonghyuk survived, killing monsters, killing people, and raising the rankings.

“Somehow survive.”

“Then what?”

Yoo Joonghyuk looked down at his phone, which was turned off, and muttered involuntarily.

“Maybe I’ll find the person who made me.”

Even though he said it, Yoo Joonghyuk wasn’t sure why he had said that all of a sudden.

“Okay.”

“...”

“Can I ask something else?”

“No.”

“When will you start liking dumplings?”

“...What do you mean?”

He could see the black sedans following them in the rear-view mirror. The newcomer stepped on the accelerator again. Her driving skills were quite good for someone of her young age. The sight of her overtaking cars while weaving through the lanes was like something from a movie.

“What did you do before?”

"I just went to work."
"What company?"
"Just... a company."
"Why did you quit?"
"The CEO kept dying."

Yoo Joonghyuk couldn't tell if her words were a joke or not.

"When did you get your license?"
"I haven't yet."
"What?"
"There's no time for me to learn, and no one to give me a license... Ah, I think I learned a bit while riding a dragon."

Dragon?

"The moment the newcomer opened her mouth again, time seemed to stop with an explosive roar. Bodies were thrown into the air, the window in front of them shattered into sharp fragments. A powerful shock shook his whole body.
Yoo Joonghyuk instinctively held on tight to Yoo Mia. There was a feeling like his body was enveloped in something soft, the environment shaking violently.
When he caught his breath, barely coming to his senses, he realised there had been a crash. Was it the newcomer's mistake? Or was it something those guys did?
Fortunately, Yoo Mia was safe in his arms. However, the muscles in his right arm were slightly sore. Maybe he was a little injured.

The newcomer.

Yoo Joonghyuk sat up, staggering as he looked around. The bonnet and front seat were crushed beyond recognition. It was a much bigger accident than he had thought.
At this point, the game was no longer important.

"Hey!"

He should take her to the hospital. There was no way the driver was safe in an accident that destroyed the front half of the car.
But the newcomer was nowhere to be seen.
He heard a knocking sound and looked around to see her knocking on the door from outside. Yoo Joonghyuk barely got out of the car with Yoo Mia.
He wanted to ask. What happened to you, where are you injured—

"Are you okay?"
"You—"
"I'm fine. The stadium is over there. Run quickly! It's not too late if you go now!"

It was a big accident.
It was such a big accident it was strange he didn't die.
How?

"Yoo Joonghyuk-seonsu."

The men in suits came one by one.

“I’ll deal with this. Go ahead and do what you need to do now.”

It was impossible. There were several men, and she was a young girl. Even if he helped, it was an unwinnable fight.

“Don’t resist and follow me immediately and no one will get hurt—”

The man who had been walking forward saying obvious things suddenly fell to his knees. The other men widened their eyes. The newcomer slowly stepped forward.

Fighting stance.

Yoo Joonghyuk had no idea whether this was real or not. Did he wake up from yesterday’s dream? Was he still dreaming of being unable to leave the basement-like workshop?

“Relax!”

Looking back at the face of the newcomer, Yoo Joonghyuk blinked his eyes.
She was speaking.

“Don’t worry so much. Unnie should have sorted out the situation by now. And... what you’re worried about won’t happen in the future. At least, until the world is destroyed.”

Yoo Joonghyuk didn’t know what she was talking about. The newcomer’s words were like the hidden comments. The words from a world he didn’t know, the words that he longed to know so much.

He tried to understand, but in the end he gave up.

Some words just had to be accepted even if he couldn’t understand them. Yoo Joonghyuk felt that at this moment.

“I’ll report it to the police, so take the opportunity and run away.”

There were only two things Yoo Joonghyuk could know.

The rookie who worked for a company where the CEO kept dying was much stronger than these men in suits.

And he had to go to the stadium right now.

The newcomer smiled at Yoo Joonghyuk as he left with Yoo Mia on his back. It was a different kind of smile than the friendly smiles he’d seen so far. It was a smile that was inexplicably old. For example, like a faith in yourself that you finally got after many years.

The newcomer, who had put down a couple more men in the meantime, waved her hands and said.

“Don’t give up until the end! It’s what you do best!”

Yoo Joonghyuk couldn’t forget the expression on her face as she looked back at the last moment for quite a long time.

【Did you find the Fragment?】

【Yes, I collected it.】

【As expected, ■■-ahjussi has seen this place too... What happened to that coach?】

【Fun.】

Yoo Joonghyuk hadn't missed his game. He listened to the nagging of the coaches and received their glares, but he played the game anyway.

The score was 2-2, as expected.

The team had played through the final game, and now it was the match that decided which team advanced to the playoffs. The opponent was a player considered to be one of his rivals.

Was it because of the crash? From the start of the game, the situation was against him. Intermittent pain in his right arm. His head was complicated.

Yoo Joonghyuk thought of Yoo Mia, who was waiting in the waiting room. Park Jinsang wasn't in the coach's seat. He thought about the directors and executives who were busily exchanging opinions.

—Ah, Yoo Joonghyuk's appearance is very different from usual. From the beginning, the game became unfavourable. It's time for GG to come out.

—Yoo Joonghyuk is famous for his GG timing being so fast.

Yoo Joonghyuk didn't give up. Normally, he would have already ended the game by now, but he somehow continued. Win one point, win another. Taking advantage of the opponents' carelessness, he won several small skirmishes.

—It's really an amazing performance.

—Isn't it an unusual style for Yoo Joonghyuk?

For the second half of the game, it seemed like the opponent was nervous.

It was still an unfavourable fight, but Yoo Joonghyuk fought hard. From builds to units, everything was under his control.

A game that could barely start.

Yoo Joonghyuk recalled the newcomer fighting with the men in suits, and the woman with white hair who found Yoo Mia and then disappeared.

He thought of his parents, who might be watching this game from somewhere.

The important units fell one by one, and the direction of the game was set. But Yoo Joonghyuk didn't give up until the fight was over.

Fight, and fight again. When there were no more units he could use, Yoo Joonghyuk's hand stopped.

—Ah! The game has been decided!

He took a slow breath and blinked his eyes to see a ruined battlefield.

A landscape where the world was destroyed.

Yoo Joonghyuk looked at the scenery for a while. The shields of the game booth were released, and the crowds of people who were watching him appeared.

At the end of the scene of destruction, there were familiar faces.

The brunette newcomer. And the white-haired woman who saved Yoo Mia.

Yoo Joonghyuk jumped up from his seat without thinking and got out of the booth. But by the time he was out, they were both gone.

After the game, Yoo Joonghyuk grabbed the coach and asked him about the rookie who helped him.

—What are you talking about? Didn't you come by taxi?

The coach didn't remember the newcomer.
Yoo Joonghyuk asked if he hadn't sent a new recruit.

—Eh? I don't know. There should be one or two new recruits this year. Anyway, I had a hard time today. Even though we lost, the game was good.

Yoo Joonghyuk didn't respond.
In the end he lost, and his team didn't advance to the playoffs.
But the coach's reaction wasn't so bad.

—The playoffs aren't the problem right now. The association and the team were all turned upside down. The tournament is making a big fuss about invalidating this game.

—Why is that...

—Didn't you hear the news?

Park Jinsang said he surrendered himself to the police right before the game started.
He didn't know why he made that choice.
What was certain is that Park Jinsang, whose face was covered in blood, went to the police station, revealed that he was a match-fixing broker, and gave a list of players and sponsors involved in the incident.

—Ha, because of that guy, all our players left. But Yoo Joonghyuk is Yoo Joonghyuk... I knew it, but I still checked. You weren't on Park Jinsang's list.

All the way back home, Yoo Joonghyuk was somehow floating.

"Obabunny, did you lose today?"

Yoo Joonghyuk thought for a moment about the player who played against him today.

"I didn't lose because I was ahead in the overall score."

"Other one lost?"

"If you look at the whole thing, I won, so I won in the end."

"Oh-babunny."

Yoo Joonghyuk thought that the word 'obabunny' might actually have a different meaning. When he turned on the phone, new articles appeared on the main portal.

—We lost, but it was a really great match. Wouldn't this be called a good game? It was a play that wasn't like Yoo Joonghyuk. I guess it made my soul cry.

Starting with an excerpt from the ambassador, comments followed.

—Did you watch Yoo Joonghyuk today? It was a really great game.

—I admit. His performance improved. The game was fun.

—But does it make sense for Yoo Joonghyuk not to be on the list? Didn't he get paid for it?

—Seeing that he usually gives up when he's losing, it seems like he went out of his way to stick it to that broker.

—But now this league seems to be ruined. There are very few top players who weren't involved.

For some reason, he didn't see hidden comments at all.

Yoo Joonghyuk continued to read the headlines of the articles.

—Association official announcement, today's game has been completely nullified.

—The list of players who participated in the match manipulation has been released.

—The match-fixing incident that brought about a shocking change in perception for the esports industry...

“Obabunny. Hand.”

Yoo Joonghyuk put down his cellphone and grabbed Yoo Mia's hand tightly.

Under the fast-approaching night of Seoul, the street lights lit up one by one. Yoo Joonghyuk, who had been staring at the light of the street lamps, looked around without realising it.

White steam billowed over the crossing.

A couple with big smiles were eating hot Taiyaki together. His anticipation slowly sinking, Yoo Joonghyuk crossed the crosswalk holding Yoo Mia's hand.

Did it really happen?

He could see the faint stars in the night sky that got quickly darker.

Yoo Joonghyuk looked up at the stars. He walked with Yoo Mia in the darkness illuminated by the stars. The supermarket he went to yesterday began to appear in the distance. Yoo Mia held his hand tightly.

“What's for dinner?”

The human body is made of what it eats.

Yoo Joonghyuk still thought so. And at home, there was salad left over from that morning. It was an incomprehensible waste to Yoo Joonghyuk to bother to eat something else without eating the salad. Strangely, however, at that moment, something came to Yoo Joonghyuk's mind.

—This world could suddenly end tomorrow, right?

Like the starlight from a distant galaxy, it was a distant concept to Yoo Joonghyuk. Maybe it was because today had already been absurd, but...

After thinking about it for a while, Yoo Joonghyuk looked at the distant sky and said:

“Pizza.”