

## Seller 791

### Chapter 791: Earth 1712: Vera's Outing day (Part-1)

Manager Jingmin drove in silence, while Tianzhu sat beside him, seemingly absorbed in his phone. Of course, as the two women weren't exactly talking in low volume, he couldn't help but overhear many things.

"Ugh, ever since my age crossed 30, my mom won't stop nagging me about getting married," Hye-rin groaned, leaning against the headrest. "She's setting up blind dates like it's her personal mission. Which celebrity is marrying at 32 these days? It's fine if they are worth dating, but seriously, all of them looked like hyenas that can't wait to jump on me if any opportunity arises..."

Xueli chuckled. "Hye-rin, let's be honest here. Isn't it because their looks aren't up to par for you? After all, you had extremely high standards as far as I know you. Just admit that you are all about the looks."

Hye-rin nodded without hesitation, crossing her arms to her chest. "Of course. Looks are as important as personality. If we weren't beautiful—if we weren't in, say, the top five percent of beauty standards—do you think we'd even have survived in this industry? Without my looks, I wouldn't have been even allowed into the agency, much less debut as an idol. Then, why shouldn't I look for good looks too?"

Xueli hummed in agreement, then grinned. "Want me to introduce someone?"

Hye-rin made a face. "A guy from the same industry is fine, but definitely not an actor. Those relationships never last. Too many egos, and too many scheduling conflicts. I'm past the age to look for short-term relationships."

"So, what? A stylist? A choreographer?"

"Maybe. But most stylists are women. And the few male ones are usually foreigners." Hye-rin wrinkled her nose. "Someone with Zhonggou's origins is fine, like even half-Han or half-Goryeo would be better, but a complete foreigner from those other continents? No way. I like a guy with a classy face with a good physique, you know, broad shoulders and all, and he should be able to understand the world of an actress and even fit into such a world. Money is not a thing for me. I earn well. Of course, the guy's personality should be all gentlemanly and..." While she was speaking of those things, she was looking for a man, she couldn't help but just give a glance at Tianzhu's back, especially his broad shoulders, although only for a moment before she continued to pay attention to the veteran actress.

Meanwhile, Tianzhu continued to scroll through his phone as if he were checking out articles, his expression unreadable.

When they finally pulled up to Hye-rin's apartment complex, she unbuckled her seatbelt and turned to Xueli. "Thanks for the ride."

"Anytime."

Hye-rin leaned forward slightly to nod at Manager Jingmin. "Thanks, Jingmin-oppa." Then, hesitating for the briefest moment, she glanced at Tianzhu. "You too, Tianzhu-ssi."

Tianzhu turned his head just enough to offer a polite nod. Nothing more.

Hye-rin lingered for half a second longer before stepping out of the car and disappearing into the building without another word.

As Hye-rin strolled toward the entrance of her apartment complex, she flashed a bright smile at the security guard, asking him how his health was today before disappearing inside.

Tianzhu, watching the interaction, leaned back in his seat and remarked, "Hye-rin-ssi seems like a nice person."

From the backseat, Xueli's lips curled into a mischievous grin. "Oh? It looks like someone is interested in someone."

Manager Jingmin nearly choked on his own spit, stealing a glance at Tianzhu in surprise. But Tianzhu remained as composed as ever, merely shrugging.

"I just meant that it's rare for someone from this country's top 0.1% to be so polite to security guards," he said, his tone casual. Then, without missing a beat, he added, "unlike Jiejie."

Xueli blinked, taken aback. "W-What? What do you mean?"

Tianzhu glanced at her briefly, then back at his phone. "You don't do that."

Xueli's mouth opened and closed before she quickly retorted, "I do! It's just that I'm always busy, and by the time I get home, I'm exhausted, so I don't notice them sometimes!"

Tianzhu nodded without looking up. "Sure. I believe you."

Xueli squinted at him. "I do!"

Tianzhu, still focused on his screen, responded flatly, "Yes, yes. I believe you."

A soft flush crept up Xueli's neck. This little brat—

Before he could react, she smacked the back of his head with a firm slap. "Don't tease your elder sister, you punk!"

"Ow. "Tianzhu rubbed the sore spot, turning to face her. Then, with a straight face, he mused, "Jiejie's tomboyish personality hasn't changed a bit. Even after reaching middle age."

Xueli's jaw dropped. "Excuse me?" She looked like she was surprised by his comment, mildly offended.

Tianzhu, unfazed, tilted his head. "Is it perimenopause or something?"

A deep blush of embarrassment spread across Xueli's face. "I am still in my prime, you little—!"

Tianzhu scoffed lightly, hitting back at her right away. "Yeah, right. You're at the doorstep of 50. You are a middle-aged woman, now."

Xueli let out a sharp hiss, raising her hand again threateningly. "Say that again, and I swear—"

Tianzhu, for once, wisely chose silence. But deep inside, he felt warmth spread through his chest.

Nothing had changed between them. Not time, not distance, not even the weight of adulthood.

And somehow, that made him feel at home.

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Meanwhile, back at Tianzhu's residence;

Vera stretched lazily, her body sprawled across the couch in a way that most would consider uncomfortable, but she found it oddly relaxing.

Her feet were hanging off one side of the sofa, her back against the armrest, and her head tilted upside down, her messy hair flowing down to the floor.

The room was softly lit, with the television providing a background soundtrack as a music show played. However, Vera wasn't really paying attention to it. Instead, her eyes were fixed on the screen of her tablet, her fingers scrolling lazily through social media and news updates, occasionally stopping to like a post or leave a quick comment.

She'd been like this for a while, lounging around and letting the hours pass without much care. If one should describe it simply, she's bored.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the robotic assistant glided silently into the room.

"Young Miss, today's lunch menu includes salmon with quinoa salad, miso soup, and a side of grilled seasoned vegetables, as instructed by Master Qin. Would you like to make any changes or additions?"

Vera didn't immediately respond. She lazily propped her head up with her hand and glanced at the assistant. The question was a routine one. She hears it every time. And if she makes any changes, the updated list will go to her dad's email, and she will get a call from him, followed by ten minutes of nagging about how healthy food is good for her body, etc.

"No, thanks," Vera said with a dismissive wave. "Cancel lunch today. I'm heading out."

The robotic assistant paused for a moment, processing her response. Its sensor lights flickered briefly as it acknowledged the change. "Understood, Young Miss. Would you require any assistance with your departure or any other arrangements?"

Vera shook her head, her eyes already drifting back to the tablet in her hands. "No, I'm fine. I've got everything I need."

The assistant tilted its head slightly, perhaps a sign of compliance or maybe just an idle movement. "Reminder: Please ensure you carry your watch with you at all times for safety and security, Young Miss."

Vera sighed, her voice a bit more playful now. "I know, I know. I won't forget. Or else, my old man will get crazily worried."

The robotic assistant seemed satisfied with her response, giving a soft nod as it prepared to exit the room. "Very well, Young Miss. Have a pleasant day."

As the assistant glided out of the room, Vera finally allowed herself to relax again, letting out a contented sigh. She hadn't planned to do much today, but she wasn't in the mood to be cooped up in the house either.

Maybe a walk outside for fresh air?

Nope. It's noon out there. Even if it is December, the sun will still be on the top of her head.

"Hmm... Let's become a tourist."

Vera pushed herself up from the couch, stretching out her limbs before grabbing her jacket and slipping on her shoes. She didn't need the robotic assistant's reminders, but she grabbed her watch anyway.

Throwing on a hoodie and slinging a backpack over her shoulder, Vera grabbed her phone and headed downstairs.

Vera stepped out of the cab and into the bustling streets of the Gongshu District.

The Dadou Lu Food Street was alive with energy, especially at lunchtime, as tourists and locals alike swarmed the sidewalks. Vera couldn't help but smile as she watched teens from nearby schools gather around, taking in the lively atmosphere.

She wandered the busy streets, her eyes glancing at colorful shop windows showcasing trendy fashion, skincare, and accessories.

But as much as she enjoyed window shopping, something else caught her attention—the mouthwatering smells coming from the nearby street stalls, the familiar smell of Goryeo culture foods.

"Ah, tteokbokki... my favorite." Vera thought, her stomach rumbling a little. With a quick glance, she made her decision and walked up to a stall where the steam from the bubbling sauce indicated its spice levels.

"Um..."

Chapter 792: Earth 1712: Vera's Outing day (Part-2)

She was about to order, but then an idea popped up in her head as she noticed a group of high schoolers around her age standing nearby, chatting and laughing as they waited for their order.

"Excuse me," she said, making sure her tone was polite but playful as she asked, "Is it too spicy?" Her words were smooth, but the strange Siberian accent in her voice was enough to catch their attention.

The high schoolers exchanged glances, a bit taken aback. One of the boys, named Wang Jun, cleared his throat, trying to suppress a smile as he replied, "Ah, umm... It's okay... not too spicy."

Another one, a girl with a ponytail, chimed in, "It could be a little spicy for those who can't handle spice. Depends on your tolerance levels?"

Vera flashed a sheepish grin, her face flushing slightly with embarrassment., "I... can handle... spicy? Little... to medium... ok." Her pronunciation wasn't perfect, but she made it seem like she tried speaking in a local dialect, her eyes wide with innocence.

Wang Jun couldn't help but smile again, clearly amused by her attempt and also attracted to her beauty. "It's not bad. Just give it a try." He handed her a napkin as if to say, Don't worry, you'll be fine.

Vera nodded and turned to the stall owner, who was busy preparing the next batch of tteokbokki. "Excuse me," she asked again, "Can I try one? One piece?"

The owner smiled warmly at her request, pausing for just a second before handing over a piece of tteokbokki, smiling knowingly at her.

"Here you go, try it," the vendor said with a smile.

With anticipation building, Vera picked up the piece, her eyes glittering in excitement. She popped it into her mouth, and the moment the spicy sauce hit her taste buds, her expression lit up. "Wow, it's just superb. Nothing like, back at Kitezh..."

The stall owner laughed softly, clearly charmed by Vera's joyful reaction. "You are adorable," she said, shaking her head with a grin.

Nearby, Wang Jun chuckled, exchanging amused looks with his friend. Her enthusiasm was infectious, and it was clear she was genuinely enjoying the experience.

Vera beamed, enjoying the taste. After a few more moments, she turned back to the vendor. "One tteokbokki, please!" she said.

The vendor carefully handed her a freshly prepared serving, still grinning from Vera's reaction.

"Enjoy," she said, and Vera took the dish gratefully, a happy smile on her face as she dug into the steaming plate. "Thank you."

The stall owner handed over Vera's tteokbokki in a clear food container, steam fogging up the plastic lid as the thick red sauce clung to the rice cakes. She added generous toppings—fish cakes sliced on the bias, and a neatly halved boiled egg that rested on top like a final touch of care. She then passed her a pair of disposable wooden chopsticks and a wrapped plastic fork.

With a small smile, the vendor asked, "Are you alone?"

Vera blinked, catching the meaning. She hurriedly shook her head, "No, I'm not alone. My dad... um... is at church. I... don't like church.)

The vendor chuckled gently at her accent and awkward phrasing with the Southern Wu nation's dialect, nodding in understanding. "(I see~)" she said, still smiling as she waved her off with a casual gesture.

Vera stepped aside, finding a quiet spot along the sidewalk beside a stone planter. Meanwhile, Wang Jun couldn't help but continue to glance at her, every once in a while.

There, she stood—not squatting or sitting, but tall and poised, the container in one hand and the chopsticks in the other. The crowd bustled around her, but she carved out her own bubble of calm amid the movement.

With careful grace, she picked up a piece of tteokbokki, blew gently on the steamy morsel, and took a bite. "Mm~"

The spicy-sweet flavor lit up her senses again, but she remained composed, chewing slowly and elegantly.

From a short distance away, a man with a DSLR camera was snapping casual street photos—vendors, signage, food, and shoes hanging from stalls. But as his lens panned toward Vera, he froze. His finger instinctively pressed the shutter. Once. Twice. Then again.

Click. Click. Click.

He brought the camera down, peered at the preview screen, and his brows lifted. The composition, the lighting, her posture—it all looked like something he'd see in a high-fashion spread. Natural. Effortless.

He smiled to himself and muttered under his breath, "That's a great shot."

Without wasting another moment, he slung the camera strap around his neck and approached the food stall, careful not to startle her. When he reached within polite speaking distance, he gave a courteous bow.

"Excuse me," he called gently.

Vera turned her head, still chewing. She blinked, slightly surprised.

The man offered a business card with both hands. "I'm sorry to bother you," he began. "I'm a fashion photographer. My name's Song Taehyun. I work with Xcess Agency."

Vera wiped her mouth again with her napkin and accepted the card, her expression cautious but curious.

"I was taking some street shots earlier," he continued, "and... well, I accidentally took a few photos of you. You looked incredibly natural—your posture, your presence, it was striking. I know it was without consent, and I truly apologize for that. But I just had to come over and tell you... You have a remarkable presence."

Vera blinked in surprise at the photographer's words of praise. "Me?" she repeated, her voice laced with genuine curiosity.

With a soft chuckle, Taehyun raised his camera again, showing her the photos he had just snapped. On the screen, Vera saw herself—mid-bite of a tteokbokki rice cake, her posture still elegant and graceful, her expression serene, though she had never expected a food stall moment to turn into a photo shoot. The portrait mode photos looked even more polished, capturing her in soft lighting with the perfect balance of casualness and poise.

Despite the simplicity of the scene, the shots were undeniably good.

Vera tilted her head, then nodded slowly, acknowledging the quality of the images. "It looks... good," she admitted, glancing at the screen again. The photos were indeed striking, but she hadn't expected to appear so composed while eating street food.

After a moment of thought, she asked, "Can you send these to me?"

"Of course." Taehyun smiled and quickly transferred the images to her phone via Bluetooth. As the files were sent over, he added, "If you're interested in exploring youth modeling, you can contact me at Xcess Agency. Just let me know."

One of the girls in that group of four that conversed with Vera earlier gasped in surprise. They had been quietly observing the exchange and were now witnessing something unexpected: an actual talent scout from Xcess Agency. A girl whispered to her friend, "Did you just see that?"

Vera, sensing their excitement, glanced at them and asked, "Is the company good?" She didn't know much about modeling agencies; she only knew about idol agencies.

The girl nodded enthusiastically, a sparkle of excitement in her eyes. "Yes, it's a very good company! They produced a lot of great artists! Have you heard of Galaxy? They're from Xcess!" she said, pointing to her friend for added emphasis.

Vera's eyes widened. "Galaxy?" she repeated, a sudden flash of recognition lighting her face. She'd heard of Galaxy before—back in Kitez. They were incredibly popular there, with songs that were often on repeat in her playlist.

"Galaxy is from here?" she asked, genuinely surprised.

The girl nodded proudly, confirming her words. "Yes! They're one of the biggest groups under Xcess! You should check them out!"

Vera's mind raced for a moment. She had always been a fan of pop songs from Zhonggou, but she hadn't connected the dots between the agency and the groups she admired. Galaxy's popularity was huge, not just in Southern Wu but internationally. The thought that she could somehow be connected to such a group was both exciting and overwhelming.

With the photos now on her phone, Vera turned back to Taehyun. "Thank you," she said with a warm smile, a flicker of curiosity still present in her eyes. "I'll think about it."

As Vera began to walk away, lost in thought, the photographer turned to leave as well, but just as he stepped onto the pavement, his phone rang. Pulling it from his pocket, he answered with a quiet, "Hello?"

He listened for a moment before responding, "Mm-hmm. No need to try convincing me, Hyung. I agree to shoot with those actresses."

There was a slight pause as the voice on the other end spoke.

"Let's say I'm in a good mood today," Taehyun continued, a smile tugging at his lips as he glanced back at Vera walking off in the distance. "Anyway, tell them that I'll accept the shoot. Have them get back to me with the concept details."

Ending the call, he put his phone back in his pocket and walked away while humming.

Chapter 793: Earth 1712: It's a part of the job

Meanwhile, at a studio complex in Genesis Town;

The set was buzzing with activity. Stylists darted back and forth, makeup artists adjusted their brushes, and cameras clicked incessantly under the bright studio lights.

Tianzhu sat alone in a corner, his mask and cap blocking most of his face as he scanned the contract sent by the management. The figures were very impressive, to say the least—8544 Credits a month, an amount greater than what even a typical white collar earns (avg: 4.6k) and far higher than a typical road manager (avg:1.8k), almost in the same lines as a B-listed Celebrity manager. But still, it didn't feel good when he looked at that salary amount. After all, the pocket money he used to give Vera and Theo is 3000 credits each.

As he was contemplating whether it was worth becoming a road manager and even going as far as threatening the CEO just to earn this amount, a shadow then fell over him. "Tianzhu-ssi?"

"Hmm?" He looked up, eyes meeting a young woman in her 20s standing before him. She had sharp yet pleasant features, her hair tied back into a neat ponytail.

"I'm Kim Yuna," she introduced herself with a polite bow. "A fellow road manager."

Tianzhu gave a small nod. "Hello."

"Xueli-nim wants to treat everyone," Yuna continued, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Iced Americanos and snacks. I was told to bring you along."

Tianzhu hesitated for a moment before pocketing his phone and standing up. "Alright. Let's go."

The café they stopped at was modern and sleek, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filling the air.

Yuna placed the order—eight iced Americanos, five lattes, two cappuccinos, and two mochas. The cashier moved swiftly, preparing the drinks while Yuna wandered over to the pastry display.

She stared at the selection, her brows slightly furrowed.

"What's wrong?" Tianzhu asked, noticing her expression.

Yuna sighed, biting her lip. "I, uh... forgot to ask exactly what kind of snacks to get. I was supposed to get croissants for Xueli-nim, but it looks like they aren't available here. And I didn't ask Jingmin-oppa what to substitute them with, in case they weren't available."

She glanced at her phone and dialed the manager's number, but the line was busy.

Tianzhu observed her for a moment before replying. "Give me a second." He held up a hand, signaling Yuna to wait. With his other hand, he slipped his phone out of his pocket and dialed a number.

"Hmm?"

Yuna watched, curious. His demeanor remained calm as he called someone.

"Jiejie... Ahem, Teacher Jiang," Tianzhu spoke as soon as the call connected, before correcting his tone. "They don't have croissants. What do you want instead?"

On the other end, Xueli's voice came through, casual but firm. "Bagels."

Tianzhu nodded. "Got it." He ended the call and turned to Yuna. "Get bagels."

Yuna's eyes widened slightly. "Wait... was that Xueli-nim just now?"

"Yeah."

Yuna stared at him as if she were trying to process something. "You have her number?"

Tianzhu merely nodded again, unfazed. "Yes."

Yuna blinked. "Huh..."

Tianzhu raised a brow. "Just buy the bagels. And a couple of rice cakes for me."

"Ah, Yes." She nodded, adding bagels to the order along with a few packs of rice cakes.

Soon, the two returned with a large coffee carrier, each cup neatly placed in its slot, along with bags of snacks. Yuna took charge of distribution, checking the list as she handed out drinks—iced Americanos, lattes, cappuccinos, and mochas.

Tianzhu, without a word, helped distribute the snacks. It was a simple, repetitive task—something he had never done in this or past life. Yet, he did it without hesitation, efficiently moving from one person to another, handing them their orders with a calm demeanor.

From a distance, Xueli spotted him. Her arms were crossed, her expression unreadable.

Finally, she turned to Manager Jingmin and pulled him aside.

"Hey, why are you giving my brother menial tasks like this? It's enough that he had to go out there to buy for everyone, but now, he also serves it? That's the job for production assistants and interns," she said, her tone sharp but quiet enough that only he could hear.

Jingmin sighed, rubbing his temple. "Teacher Jiang, this is part of a road manager's job. Miss Yuna has been doing the same thing for the past couple of years, and there are no interns either. If I start giving him preferential treatment, the higher-ups might not like it. Moreover, neither of you wants your familial relationship with him to get out. So..."

Xueli sighed, leaning against the wall. "I know, but it is uncomfortable for me. Let Yuna handle such things by herself, at least when I'm in the room. You can send him on another coffee run or whatever you can think of."

"Understood." Jingmin nodded, glancing at Tianzhu for a moment before walking away.

Xueli gave one last glance toward Tianzhu, who continued working with the same composed expression, oblivious to the conversation happening behind his back.

Her grip on her phone tightened.

"Why was he lowering himself like this? Was it really for Vera, as he said?" She couldn't understand what was going through her brother's mind.

Meanwhile, Manager Jingmin, without wasting a second, hurried over to Tianzhu, who was in the middle of handing a coffee cup to a cameraman.

"Here. Good work." "Thank you."

"Tianzhu, a quick word, please."

Tianzhu raised an eyebrow as Jingmin grabbed his arm, pulling him aside with an awkward smile. "Tianzhu, you don't have to do this. We have other staff for it."

Tianzhu looked at him blankly. "Why not? I'm a road manager, and I believe this is also part of the job."

Jingmin gulped, replying in a pleading tone. "Just... please don't. Teacher Jiang will tear me apart if you keep doing this."

Tianzhu sighed, shaking his head slightly. "I'll talk to her later." He patted Jingmin's shoulder. "For now, let me do my job."

Before Jingmin could protest further, Tianzhu turned away and continued distributing the coffee, bowing slightly in courtesy as he handed each cup to staff members.

"Ugh... this brother and sister pair would be the death of me, one day. They just do whatever they want and refuse to listen." Jingmin muttered under his breath, rubbing his forehead.

Once the photoshoot wrapped up, the team packed their equipment, and Xueli, Tianzhu, and Manager Jingmin left the studio, heading toward their vehicle.

As soon as Jingmin started the car, his phone suddenly rang. "Excuse me—" he muttered, answering the call. "Hello?"

A few seconds passed, and his expression quickly shifted from casual to tense. "What? When?" He listened intently before sighing. "I understand. I'll be there soon."

He ended the call and turned to face Xueli. "Something happened at home. I have to go."

Xueli frowned slightly. "Is it serious?"

Jingmin didn't elaborate, but his urgency was evident. He looked over at Yuna. "You'll have to drive them."

Yuna blinked. "Me?" Her eyes momentarily darted to Tianzhu, who kept his mouth shut.

"You have a Class 2 license, don't you?"

Yuna hesitated for a second but nodded. "Yeah, of course." She stepped out of the passenger seat and moved to the driver's side.

Jingmin quickly bid farewell to Xueli and Tianzhu before rushing off.

As Yuna adjusted the seat and started the engine, she glanced at Xueli through the rearview mirror. "Fasten your seatbelts, ma'am, Tianzhu-ssi."

As the vehicle cruised down the road, Xueli spoke. "You don't have to wear the mask anymore."

Tianzhu nodded and pulled it off.

Yuna, glancing at him through the corner of her eyes, nearly did a double-take. She could already see that he had good looks even when he had a mask all along, but his sharp features and well-defined jawline made her pause.

After hesitating for a moment, she finally asked, "If you don't mind me asking... Tianzhu-ssi, why were you wearing a mask? Fine dust is minimal today."

Tianzhu shrugged, his voice calm. "I can't handle crowds properly. Wearing a mask helps reduce my anxiety."

Xueli, who had been watching him from the back, shook her head slightly. 'That lie is actually pretty believable.'

Instead of pressing further, she leaned back in her seat, closed her eyes, and put on her headphones, immersing herself in music.

Meanwhile, Yuna couldn't shake her curiosity. "So, Tianzhu-ssi, have you worked as a road manager before?"

"No. I'm a rookie."

Yuna's eyebrows raised. "A rookie? But... rookies aren't usually assigned to top actresses like Xueli-nim."

Tianzhu didn't react much. "I guess I got lucky."

Yuna remained silent for a moment before pressing on. "What were you doing before this?"

Tianzhu leaned back, looking out the window. "I was a store owner in Kitezh."

Yuna blinked. "Kitezh? That's in the Novarusk Republic. And a store owner? Why the sudden career change?"

"The war and sanctions hit the economy hard. Our country went into recession, and many companies were forced to lay off their employees. I had to return home."

Yuna nodded slowly, processing the information.

Then something else clicked in her head. He had called Xueli "Jiejie," which already indicates a close bond. Then, He had her personal number. Manager Jingmin, who was usually strict, was acting quite polite around him. Tianzhu sat in the front seat. It would be common sense for the manager to give the job to a male road manager who sat beside him to drive in his place.

But instead, he gave the job to her. Something didn't feel right for her.

Yuna wanted to ask how he knew Xueli personally, but she held back as the actress sat right behind them. She knows her place.

As a result, Yuna kept her thoughts to herself and continued driving; her curiosity wouldn't die down anytime soon.

Chapter 794: Earth 1712: Jerks are everywhere

Meanwhile, back at Xihu District, as the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting soft golden hues across the city, Vera found herself wandering through the vibrant heart of the district, the Wushan Square. The area was alive with the hum of energy, filled with students, tourists, and artists. The free market was in full swing, with local vendors showcasing their handmade crafts, artwork, and other unique creations.

This was her favorite part of the city she found so far—where students, artists, dreamers, and wanderers all collided into a chaotic but still beautiful mess.

Drawn by the rhythmic beat and the excited chatter, Vera moved closer to the sound. A small crowd had gathered around a busking performance, and from the front, she could see a group of teenagers on stage, energetically performing a catchy song.

They had professional equipment, matching in-ear monitors, and crisp choreography.

A banner nearby read: Alphabet – DEBUT SHOWCASE

Agency: StarX Entertainment

Vera leaned in to watch, folding her arms and nodding along to the beat. The group, while clearly rookie idols, had charisma and tight synchronization, and their debut song was catchy—a summer pop track with bright vocals and flashy moves. Since it is winter, it is kinda weird to hear such a type of debut song. After all, winter debuts usually lean toward cozy, emotional, or dramatic concepts, but then again, it isn't a hard-and-fast rule. Moreover, StarX is a small-time agency. They can't afford to waste too much time on training/preparation time as it costs too much money.

As the performance ended, the group bowed to enthusiastic applause, thanked the audience, and began packing up. Vera clapped lightly, impressed, then moved along the street, just enjoying the lingering buzz.

That's when something caught her eye.

A pair of twin girls stood not far from one of the open areas, surrounded by cables and equipment—not setting up, but rather... packing down. Their faces were pinched with frustration. Vera slowed her steps. Something felt off.

An older man, who seemed to be part of the informal organizing team, was speaking with them, his arms crossed. "You're next on the list. What's going on? Are you canceling?"

One of the twins, the one without any glasses, sighed and scratched her head. "Our guitarist... he had to leave for an emergency." Her voice was laced with visible disappointment.

The other twin added quickly, "We were going to just play acoustic versions of our songs, but half our set needs the guitar. We don't have a backup."

The man tilted his head. "So what now? Want me to push your slot to later while you try to adjust? Or do you want to cancel?"

The twins exchanged a worried glance, unsure how to proceed.

Before either of them could answer, Vera stepped forward from the small group of onlookers that had started gathering. She held her hands up slightly in a friendly gesture. "Sorry—I, uh, accidentally overheard." She smiled at the twins, continuing to play a tourist with a Siberian dialect but with enough clarity for native speakers to understand it properly. "I play guitar. Been playing for four years now."

The three of them looked at her in surprise.

"I mean, I don't know your songs or anything," Vera added quickly, "but if you need help, and if you can walk me through the chords or even do a quick run-through... maybe I can fill in?"

The glasses twin said. "We are doing 'Live As Always'? And 'I Hate Myself More Than You.' Heard of those songs or..." Unlike her older sister, she was slightly skeptical. Even if this stranger knew how to play guitar as she claimed, based on her accent and her appearance, it is likely that she is a foreigner, based on her green eyes. Would she know many songs from Zhonggou?

Well, as long as she heard their names, it should be okay. The older twin was more optimistic than her glasses twin.

Vera blinked. "I know 'Live As Always.' One second," she said, reaching for the guitar resting near them. She strummed a few soft chords, tuning by ear as her fingers moved fluidly. Then, she launched into a clean verse of the requested song, her tempo steady, matching the subtle melancholy tone of the piece.

The twins stared at her, mouths slightly open in disbelief. The sound was exactly what they needed. Heck, it sounds even better in this stranger's hand than their teammate's.

The informal organizer, meanwhile, glanced at his watch, noting that the performance time was almost here. "Alright, it looks like you are set. I'll push your performance to two lots away. That leaves you half an hour to practice."

"Thank you." The twins bowed to him.

The twins glanced at each other, both thinking the same thing. They don't need to discuss. Both of them nodded to each other at the same time.

The older twin smiled. "Okay... let's give it a try." She held out her hand. "I'm Qin Jiaqi. And this is my sister, Jiayi."

Vera shook her hand, grinning. "I'm Veronika. Friends call me Vera."

Over the next thirty minutes, the three girls moved to a quieter corner, just beyond the reach of the current performance. Vera listened to the original track twice on one of their phones, adjusting her strumming to match the beat and energy. The twins sang softly, only practicing their harmonies in low tones so they wouldn't disturb the other acts.

Vera was focused, her fingers running smoothly on the strings. She was quick to adapt, giving subtle nods and glances to the twins as they fell into rhythm.

When the organizer finally waved them over, all three girls took a deep breath. Vera rolled her sleeves, slung the guitar strap across her shoulder, and followed the twins to the center.

As the trio stepped up, the crowd began to form again—drawn partly by the anticipation and partly by the intrigue of the twins and one who seemed like a foreigner.

They began with "Live As Always", Vera's chords clean and understated, keeping herself in the background, not trying to stand out. She wasn't there to perform—she knew she was helping, and didn't try to dominate them. Her expression was calm and focused. Each note was played in harmony with the sisters' voices.

The twins sang with emotion, their voices blending like streams meeting mid-river. The crowd swayed. Some whispered about how the "backup guitarist" looked like a model. Others just listened, smiling.

The second song was slightly more upbeat, filled with emotional tension. Vera adjusted smoothly, her transitions and tempo carrying the performance with professional subtlety.

When the final note hit, applause erupted from the crowd. The sisters bowed deeply. Vera gave a small bow too, then carefully handed back the guitar. "Thank you," she said.

"No, we should thank you," Jiaqi replied, almost laughing. "You saved us."

Vera then pulled out her phone. "Let's take a selfie together?"

The three girls huddled together, grinning, as Vera held up her phone.

"Okay, one more. This time, make a silly face..."

Just as they posed again, a figure suddenly leaned in from behind, his face inches from Vera's shoulder. Click.

Startled, the three girls jumped, and Vera instinctively took a step forward, spinning around. Behind them stood three boys, maybe seventeen or eighteen.

The one in front, with dyed ash-brown hair and an arrogant smirk, pointed a finger-gun at Vera. "Nice shot, right?"

"You scared us," Jiayi muttered, frowning as she adjusted her glasses.

Jiaqi also frowned. "What the hell are you doing here?"

The boy let out a chuckle. "Nothing much. I was just here roaming around. By the way, who is this beauty? A new friend of yours?"

He took a step forward, looking Vera up and down like she was a puzzle. "I'm impressed, though. You were good up there. That playing was clean. Very cool."

Vera blinked, unsure what to say.

"I'm Tang Roujin by the way," he continued, brushing his hair back. "Future owner of Mirae Industries. Ever heard of it?"

"No," Vera replied flatly, crossing her arms.

That gave him a brief pause. "Seriously? Whatever, it doesn't matter. Want to grab a drink with me? Something cold?"

"I'm 18, not legal to drink yet," Vera replied, folding her arms.

Tang Roujin squinted at her, then gave a low chuckle. "Well, congratulations, then. You can have your first drink with us."

"Still not interested," Vera said, backing up slightly.

"Fine, fine. No drinks. Let me buy you ice cream then. It's my treat." He flashed what was probably meant to be a charming grin.

"I don't know you," Vera said, voice sharp now. "So, no."

Tang Roujin's grin widened as if he enjoyed the pushback. "You've got fire. I like that."

Vera exchanged a look with the twins, already stepping away in annoyance. Jiaqi gave the boy a dry look. "Leave us or we'll shout for harassment."

"Alright... Alright..."

As the girls walked off, Jiaqi muttered, "This whole place is full of jerks like that."

"And we have to see that jerk at the school, too," Jiayi added, shaking her head.

Vera's jaw clenched. "Jerks are everywhere."

Chapter 795: Earth 1712: Vera's battle

She forced a breath out through her nose, calming herself. "Thanks for letting me play with you. Really. But I'm gonna wander a bit."

"Sure," Jiaqi said. "Take care, okay?"

After exchanging phone numbers with the twins, Vera left the place, turning down one of the winding side lanes after exiting the Wushan Square

The energy of the crowd faded as she got further from the center, replaced by quiet alleys and shops.

She was just admiring a booth selling ceramic wind chimes when a voice called out behind her.

"Hey! Girl! Wait... you dropped something."

She turned, half on guard... and froze.

The same three boys from earlier stood across the street.

This time, Tang Roujin raised his phone, snapped a photo of her, and laughed loudly. "Oops. Maybe you dropped your wings or something?"

His friends howled, slapping each other's backs like it was the funniest thing ever.

Vera's eyes darkened as she replied. "That's the lamest pick-up line ever."

She clenched her fists for a moment before releasing them and turning around to walk away, ignoring them.

Meanwhile, far away on the rooftop of a nearby building, Zealot, the man assigned to watch over her by Sungjun, knelt behind the shade of a rusted billboard, a pair of military-grade binoculars pressed to his eyes as usual.

He hummed quietly to himself. "Should I intervene?" he murmured.

His fingers hovered near the case beside him, a matte-black briefcase with biometric locks.

But then he lowered the binoculars slightly, shaking his head. "No, I was only told to intervene when it is a situation where this young lady cannot handle it by herself."

Right then, he watched the three boys run after her; the leader of the gang seemed visibly irritated.

He grabbed her hands, stopping Vera from moving further.

"You..." As Vera was surprised and then tried to get free, Tang Roujin spoke to her, leaning his head forward. "You know what. Forget about a treat. How about accompanying me and my friends to the club? I'll buy you anything you want."

"This..." Zealot grabbed the briefcase immediately. "This is no longer teasing. I should take him out right now."

He took out what seemed like a mini sniper rifle from the case and aimed at the boy. As Zealot wondered where to strike, the head, the neck, the leg, perhaps... Just as he decided to aim at the hand that grabbed Vera, he found Vera, visibly frustrated, transformed.

The blinding flash of light pushed away Roujin.

Her features then warped, her form expanding into the shape of a black wolf. It brought the attention of the crowd instantly. Some even took out their phones to take the footage.

"Hmm... it looks like the young lady has decided to take action. Let's wait a bit more." Zealot mumbled.

"What the..." The boy faltered for a moment, taken aback by the sudden shift in Vera's demeanor. But he wasn't done.

"You little sht."

With a growl, he summoned a blue fireball in his hand, the flames crackling and growing in size.

He hurled it toward Vera, taking the initiative to attack.

Vera turned into a blur and dodged to the side; the blue fireball went past her and was about to hit someone, but some hooded person blocked it, and the fireball disappeared.

Meanwhile, Vera charged at the boys and swung her claws at Roujin. The latter blocks it, but has her arm injured with her claws cut deeply into his skin.

Gaaah!

Letting out a painful, guttural scream, he orders the other two to attack her. "Kill that bich."

One of the two boys grew bigger and muscled before giving Vera a punch to her head.

Vera blasted away, sliding against the ground for a while before she stopped right before she was about to collide with the people behind her.

There was a little girl standing almost right behind, crying aloud. The mother hugged her and attempted to drag her back.

It was at this moment that the boy threw another fireball at Vera.

Vera's body is enveloped with lightning sparks.

She was about to attempt evading, but just then, her eyes widened in the realization of that action, and as a result, she didn't move from the spot, letting the fireball strike her.

She collapsed to the ground, her form shifting back to her human state, a bruise appearing on her shoulder with a burnt mark.

The boy then conjured another fireball, stepping toward her. The crowd spectated, gasps and murmurings filled the place.

"So, you really think you can take us head-on because you can transform into a wolf? I guess that is why you must be so proud. Watch me destroy that face of yours so that no man would even care to look at it."

Just as he was about to throw it at Vera, something blurred formed, followed by the appearance of a hooded figure.

He let down the hood and showed his face, looking down at Vera. "Hey, are you alright?"

"Wang Jun, stop poking your nose into my business. Get lost now," Tang Roujin scowled, stepping forward, but the boy stood his ground.

With a deep breath, he raised his hand, summoning a massive golem that materialized beside him, a towering, hulking creature made of stone.

"Try me if you dare," the young man said calmly.

The troublemakers hesitated, Roujin cursing under his breath as he looked at the towering golem. "Tch... Let's go." Without another word, the group scattered, retreating from the place.

While the videos went on to the internet, on several social handles, some public and some just private, the savior turned back to Vera, checking on her.

She stood on shaky legs, looking at him. "You alright?" He asked again. She nodded, slightly in a daze as she stared at his face. She felt like she had seen him somewhere, but couldn't point him out.

"I'm fine," she muttered.

Wang Jun, the one who encountered her when she was on a street food tour in the afternoon, nodded with a smile and put on the hood again before walking away.

Vera's gaze lingered on his back for a moment before he left, disappearing into the crowd. She didn't speak to him further, didn't thank him, nothing. She just stared in a daze.

Meanwhile, on the nearby rooftop, Zealot gritted his teeth. "Fk. I didn't intervene in the right time, and the young lady was injured. I was supposed to intervene and make sure she didn't get injured. The General (Tempest) is going to punish me. I can't escape from this. So, I can only ask for some leniency. No, before that, let's first take care of him and then inform the General."

Meanwhile, at Xueli's residence, Tianzhu was focused on the schedule sent by Jingmin, who, for some reason, went on a three-day emergency leave. In Jingmin's absence, Tianzhu was appointed as the temporary assistant to handle the scheduling.

04:00 AM — Salon

07:00 AM — Breakfast

10:00 AM – Live radio interview to promote her upcoming movie, plus some general life updates.

1:45 PM – Fashion magazine cover shoot for Elle Global, featuring another actress.

6:00 PM – Fine dining business meeting with a brand CEO she was endorsing, discussing future collaborations.

8:30 PM – Night spa session to relieve stress.

Tianzhu exhaled. "That's a packed schedule you have today, Jiejie. You don't have time for even lunch."

"Yeah, I know." Xueli shrugged. "That's why I told Jingmin to push the 7 o'clock dining meeting to 6 so that I can have an early dinner. I was also invited to a late-night talk show, but I refused. After all, I'm no longer an actress who wanted to climb the ladder as much as possible. Now, I'm established and I have family to spend with."

Tianzhu shook his head. "No wonder you have an early perimenopause."

Xueli's jaw dropped. "Do you want to get smacked up in the face?"

Tianzhu grinned, silently staring out the window without making any further comment. But inwardly, he thought, "You really should thank Qin Dongzhi for this. His obsession with his work and negligence toward us made us spend more time with our children."

In the evening;

Neon lights buzzed along the Wulin square, spilling over into the late-night energy of one of Hangzhou's most notorious nightlife districts. Zealot moved swiftly, heading straight for the club he was supposed to go to. Club Nostalgia.

He blended in with ease with an AirPods in his ear, walking past the glittering interior filled with patrons talking, laughing, and drinking.

"Zealot, CCTV recordings have been put on loop," someone spoke into the AirPods.

"Got it. Keep it that way for now." Zealot muttered under his breath, going through the crowd.

He made his way to a private booth at the back, the crowd thick and loud, unaware of his presence.

The boy was easy to find.

He was seated with a group of friends, a 19-year-old surrounded by grown adults, both men and women.

One woman, laughing and all but hanging off him, was giving him a lap dance, her body shaking in circles as the boy smirked, completely absorbed in the moment.

The moment his eyes captured the boy's presence, his jaw clenched. "Found you, bastard." Zealot didn't waste any time giving the order to the hacker. "Zero, disable the Lights, all sorts of lights. Let the music go on."

"Affirmed"

In a matter of seconds, the world around him darkened.

"Wooo"

Outside, on the dance floor, cheers erupted from some guys and girls due to the lights going out.

But not everyone had the same reaction. Those in the private booths have an entirely opposite reaction.

Chapter 796: Earth 1712: The Photoshoot

"What the hell?"

"Who turned off the lights?"

"Manager!"

Someone screamed. Glass clinked to the floor. Voices shot up in panic.

Meanwhile, Zealot quietly slipped into the private booth. His night vision shades captured the boy's position.

As if the heavens were helping him out, the target himself left the group and walked toward him, mistaking him for a staff member. "Hey, you. What the hell is happening here? Go and brin..."

Smash

The sound of glass shattering was deafening in the silence. A bottle of beer broke cleanly over the 19-year-old's head, its shards slicing into his scalp.

"Argh..." He screamed and tried to stand, his mana surging into his body. "Who is..." However, before he could speak any further, Zealot grabbed him by the collar and hurled him against the wall with terrifying force.

The sound of his body slamming into the surface echoed through the booth, but the boy's scream was the only thing that filled Zealot's ears.

The others shrieked, scrambling blindly to figure out what was happening.

"WHO IS IT?"

"WHAT'S GOING ON!"

Meanwhile, the boy tried to stand again, but Zealot raised his fist, crackling with dense mana.

Crack

The Punch landed cleanly on the boy's knee, shattering its hard bone inside. He collapsed, howling in agony.

"Argh... who... Aaahhh"

Zealot then crouched beside him, pressing close and whispering into his ear. "You think your daddy's money protects you? It could save you from the corrupted officers, but there are people whom not even your dear daddy dares to offend."

The boy trembled, too stunned to respond. And his mind was in a mess. He just didn't understand what was going on and why this was even happening.

"You're lucky that I have strict orders not to kill anyone, Young Master Tang," Zealot continued, his tone low and deadly. "Next time, if you are spotted acting like a spoiled rich brat and bullying whoever you see, the punch will land directly on your skull instead. Understand?"

Then, like a ghost, Zealot disappeared from the private booth before the lights flickered back on.

The young man was seen on the floor, barely conscious, as blood had flowed from his knees like a stream.

By noon, they arrived at the Four Seasons Hotel for the Elle Global photoshoot.

The Presidential Suite had already been transformed into a bustling studio. Photographers, lighting technicians, stylists, and assistants moved around, setting up equipment. Amidst the commotion, a familiar face was waiting—Lee Hye-rin.

The moment she spotted Xueli, her eyes lit up. "Unnie!" she called cheerfully, walking up to her.

Xueli blinked. "Rin Rin, when did you get here?"

The younger actress grinned. "Just a while ago."

With that simple greeting, Hye-rin subtly made it clear to everyone in the room that she and Xueli weren't just industry colleagues but very close friends.

Then, her gaze shifted to Tianzhu. "Oh? Tianzhu-ssi?" She tilted her head. "Are you sick or something?"

Tianzhu, wearing his mask as usual, simply nodded in acknowledgment but said nothing.

Before Hye-rin could press further, Xueli redirected her attention with casual conversation. Meanwhile, Tianzhu got to work.

As a road manager, his job wasn't just about following Xueli around. In the absence of the manager, he needed to ensure everything ran smoothly.

First, he met with the Elle Global staff, confirming the schedule.

Next, he checked if all required personnel had arrived, then met with the principal photographer to review the planned poses and backdrops. He flipped through the reference images on a tablet, making mental notes.

Then, he moved on to the outfits.

Inspected the garments to ensure they were clean and wrinkle-free.

Checked the accessories—jewelry, shoes, gloves—making sure they were all present.

Confirmed the emergency kit had essentials like pins, wipes, and extra shoes.

Once everything seemed in order, Tianzhu headed to the changing rooms—two separate bedrooms assigned to Xueli and Hye-rin.

He stepped inside Xueli's first, checking for any hidden cameras. After that, he moved to Hye-rin's changing room.

With everything clean, Tianzhu walked out of the room and headed back to Xueli.

Keeping his voice low, he gave her a brief rundown of everything he had done—the schedule confirmation, wardrobe inspection, and security sweep. Then, he gave her the green signal.

Xueli nodded in approval, while Tianzhu added, "I also called Yuna. She's on her way."

"Oh? You did it for me, too?" Hye-rin smiled warmly at the same time, listening to his report from the side. "Thanks."

He gave a small nod in response.

Xueli couldn't help but praise her brother with a grin on her face. "You're learning fast. It's only Day 2, and you're already acting like a pro."

Tianzhu shrugged. "Manager Li sent me a step-by-step checklist. I just followed instructions."

Xueli chuckled. "That guy really takes his work seriously." Then, her expression turned thoughtful. "I wonder what's going on with him... Even when his wife got into a serious accident, he only took two days off. It's strange for a workaholic like him to skip work on personal issues. Must be something serious..."

Tianzhu glanced at the schedule as he asked, "Do you want to visit his house after the shoot?"

Xueli tilted her head in thought, but before she could reply, Hye-rin checked her phone.

"It's already 12:08." She sighed, letting out a comment. "We haven't even started makeup yet. The shoot will probably be delayed by at least an hour. You know the reputation of Taehyun-ssi. He is literally a perfectionist. Unless he is satisfied, he won't let us go..."

Xueli shrugged at that. "Then we'll just ditch meeting Stunt Master Ha. I'll ask for a rain check."

Tianzhu raised an eyebrow. "Is that okay?"

"Of course," Xueli replied smoothly. "I haven't even signed the contract yet. No need to rush when I have other commitments."

Tianzhu simply nodded in understanding.

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The photoshoot stretched on for three hours as planned, with three concepts.

The first part consisted of solo shoots—Xueli and Hye-rin, each taking turns in front of the camera. The crew worked in meticulous detail, adjusting the lights, fixing stray hairs, and ensuring that the angles captured the essence of the luxury brand they were representing.

Xueli, with her undeniable presence, owned the set with effortless grace, as expected of her.

Dressed in a sleek black Saint Laurent power suit, she exuded a sense of authority and elegance; each pose of hers made everyone realize her status as an A+ listed celebrity. Whether she stood against the backdrop of the hotel's marble-clad interior or casually draped herself over a plush velvet chaise, every shot screamed sophistication just naturally.

However, Tianzhu, being her brother, didn't have much reaction to her beauty or the poses.

Then came Hye-rin's turn.

She stepped onto the set in a soft ivory Dior silk gown, the delicate fabric cascading around her as she settled by the floor-to-ceiling window. Just as he stood there and posed, Tianzhu's eyes fell on her, and from then on, they never left.

Song Taehyun, the fashion photographer from Xcess Entertainment, directed her to tilt her chin slightly, letting the natural sunlight bathe her face. The contrast between the golden glow of the afternoon and the cool tones of the gown created an almost dreamlike quality. Well, atleast for Tianzhu.

From his position in the corner, he observed silently with his mask still in place. For some reason, he just couldn't take his eyes off Hye-rin. Fortunately, everyone was too busy to observe his expression.

Each pose she struck, whether a graceful turn of her wrist or the subtle way she let the gown flow around her, felt just as effortless for her as Xueli's. As someone who won the Southern Wu's nation crush award twice in a row, during the past two years, Hye-rin was indeed a natural attraction for others. But Tianzhu, who didn't care much about her appearance so far because of her lack of mana, found himself just as attracted to her as the others.

And then in the middle of the solo shoot, for a brief moment, her gaze flickered towards him, and their eyes met.

A small, mysterious smile played on her lips when she saw his expression, but she didn't say anything and simply turned back to the camera, continuing her work.

Tianzhu exhaled sharply, turning his attention back to his phone, pretending to check the schedule. "Okay, I need to stop staring at her. Man, she is beautiful though."

The next phase of the shoot began with twin shots featuring both actresses together.

Xueli and Hye-rin stood side by side, a stunning contrast—Xueli's sharp, bold confidence against Hye-rin's soft, understated elegance. They wore matching diamond earrings with their dresses flowing together.

"Now, please interact with each other as naturally as possible. We'll take shots from different angles and finalize later," Taehyun spoke, already ready with the camera.

Both of them nodded at the same time, going into their work mode. Meanwhile, Taehyun wandered all around the place as he continuously clicked on the shutter.

By the time the final flash went off and Taehyun called "Alright! That's a wrap!", everyone was relieved.

Xueli stretched her arms, rubbing them a little bit. "One hour non-stop shooting... God, my back is stiff."

Hye-rin looked at her in worry. "You alright, Unnie?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just been a while since I have done photoshoots for magazines. Forgot how rigorous they will be. Fortunately, we pulled it off the first part without much delay..." Xueli chuckled, waved off casually.

## Chapter 797: Earth 1712: The Photoshoot (Part-2)

After a while, the location shifted to the grand staircase. The concept for this set was "glamour in motion", capturing a modern femme fatale.

Hye-rin stepped forward, now dressed in a tailored black Alexander McQueen blazer dress, cinched at the waist. The dress was short yet structured with its sharp lines balanced by the bold statement of her thigh-high leather boots. Tianzhu's eyes were drawn to her thigh with flawless porcelain skin...

Hye-rin, who was just as looking for Tianzhu too, spotted him staring at her even before the shoot began and once again she smiled to herself, but became rather slightly shy, looking down at her toes...

Right then, Taehyun called out, his voice filled with energy: "Alright, Miss Lee, come to the position..."

As the second part of the shooting started, Taehyun spoke, "This is your moment! Think bold. Think unstoppable. You're walking away from something or someone—but with complete control. Give us that last glance over the shoulder, like you own the world."

Right at those words, Hye-rin immediately smirked, her expression effortlessly shifting into character. For a moment, there was a glint in her eyes, and a faint hue of pink was seen inside the pupils, but it only stayed for a second.

However, at this, Tianzhu's facial expression changed. He crossed his arms, standing against the wall, but his attention was placed on the photographer... "This fellow... he was using the hypnotism on Hyerin. I didn't notice before. It was subtle, but I guess Hyerin is affected because she is a plainfolk. But what should I do about it? It's not like he is hurting her... Hmm?" His frown deepened at the thought.

Meanwhile, Hyerin started her descent from the staircase. Taehyun gasped quietly, immediately pressing the shutter.

Click. Click. Click.

From his position by the monitoring screen, Tianzhu once again started paying attention to the beauty, watching the images appear in real time. Each frame was near perfection, but one particular shot stood out—

Hye-rin's smoky eyes locked directly on the lens with her lips parted slightly as if about to say something, as the lights glistened against her sharp jawline.

Tianzhu blinked. "That was... something else." He mumbled involuntarily. Upon realizing, he cleared his throat, looking away. He wasn't supposed to be this focused on her.

But at the same time, he couldn't help but remember their first encounter, how dismissive he was, treating her as someone he casually passed in the streets. And now, there was this subtle attraction that made his gaze difficult to pull away from her, even though she wasn't his type at all. He likes someone who fights like a soldier, not a pretty princess who needs saving.

This subtle attraction caused him trouble, giving him the urge to leave the shoot and return home. However, the shoot still has a segment left. As a result, he was forced to stay behind.

As the next setup was being prepared, the production team moved to the rooftop infinity pool while the sun was slowly descending toward the horizon.

This time, the photoshoot's concept was "Serenity and Strength".

Hye-rin emerged from the dressing area in a sleek Bottega Veneta slip dress with the fabric hugging her frame in all the right places. She was barefoot but each step against the warm tiles exuded a natural grace.

The set design was simple but effective—the infinity pool stretching out behind her with an orange-looking sun in the background, and a crystal glass in her hand, filled with a refreshingly cool, citrus-infused drink.

The photographer, Taehyun, adjusted his camera, looking pleased.

"Alright, Miss Hye-rin, this time, you're not just looking at the view or came here to rest... You're a woman at the top of the world, enjoying the moment, owning it. The water, the city, the sky—it's all yours. Keep a soft but intense gaze."

Again, as a pink hue of glow appeared in her eyes and disappeared, Hye-rin immediately took her position, leaning against the pool's edge, one arm resting along the sleek tiles while her other hand lightly cradling the glass. Her fingers traced the condensation on the surface, giving the illusion of someone completely relaxed, yet aware of her own power.

The camera shutter clicked as she looked to the side.

20 minutes later;

As the photoshoot had officially come to an end, the production team immediately crowded around the monitors, reviewing the shots.

Three themes, three completely different moods, but both women had delivered what they were expected to. They were happy, the photographer was also happy, and the staff was also happy that it didn't take too long. So, yeah, the shoot was considered a success.

When the photographer finally called out, "That's a wrap!", a wave of applause filled the suite.

As the shooting wrapped up, and the bright lights of the set had dimmed, the crew members were scattered around, packing up the last of their equipment. Xueli and Hye-rin, now back in their casual clothes, strolled out of the building with their faces still glowing with the afterglow of the shoot.

Tianzhu was waiting by the exit, leaning against the wall. He held out two iced Americanos in his hands. "Good job, both of you," he said, his voice full of approval.

"Thanks," Xueli replied with a grateful smile, taking her cup. She then nodded at Hye-rin, who also reached out for the other drink.

"Thanks for your hard work too," Hye-rin said, sipping the coffee.

The sound of car engines echoed from the parking lot, and Yuna brought the vehicle to the entrance for Xueli. However, just as she was about to walk toward the vehicle, Xueli's eyes wandered briefly to Hye-rin, who exited the hotel alongside her and was seen beside her brother. She hesitated for a moment with her fingers drumming lightly against her cup.

"Xiao Zhu," she said suddenly, speaking in a formal tone. Maybe it is because Hye-rin was standing around.

He turned toward her, his smile fading into a look of curiosity. "Yes?"

"I was just thinking," she continued, glancing at the others briefly. "Yuna and I are going to Jingmin's place. He might get intimidated if there are too many people around and you are barely an acquaintance to him, so... we'll go alone."

Tianzhu blinked, processing her words for a second. "The manager? Oh, right, I almost forgot about him."

"Yeah, we need to go," she replied with a nod. "But... I was wondering if Hye-rin could drop you off at the Central Park bus stop on the way. It's near her place and convenient."

Both Hye-rin and Tianzhu looked at each other, surprised by the sudden suggestion.

"You want me to drop him there?" Hye-rin asked, a soft chuckle escaping her lips. "I didn't expect that. But I'm fine with it. No problem."

Tianzhu rubbed the back of his neck, a little flustered. "Thanks, Miss Lee," he said awkwardly, trying to suppress a smile. "I guess it's on the way, right?"

Hye-rin seemed like she was suppressing her smile too, "Of course. It was."

Tianzhu nodded again, his cheeks slightly flushed as he looked away. There was an awkward silence between them for a moment before Xueli spoke up again. "Thanks, Rin Rin. I'll catch up with you later, then."

Hye-rin waved her hand dismissively. "No worries, you go do your thing, Unnie." She then turned to Tianzhu. "Alright, let's go. I'll drop you off."

Tianzhu stepped into the passenger seat of her vehicle, buckling his seatbelt as Hye-rin slid into the driver's side.

The car glided smoothly through the streets of Hangzhou with the golden hues of the late afternoon sun filtering through the windows. For a while, neither of them spoke.

Tianzhu stared out the window, watching the city pass by in a blur of modern glass buildings and tree-lined streets. Meanwhile, Hye-rin's fingers lightly tapped against the steering wheel in a rhythmic pattern, as if she were lost in thought.

Eventually, he was the one who spoke first, breaking the awkward silence between them. "So... I heard that your manager's on maternity leave."

Hye-rin glanced at him briefly before nodding. "Yeah."

He hesitated before asking, "Then... how come the agency still hadn't hired a temporary manager for you? You must be busy."

Hye-rin chuckled softly, her grip on the steering wheel relaxing. "It's not like I'm drowning in work right now. Just a few photoshoots, some CFs here and there. Nothing major."

Tianzhu raised an eyebrow. "Still, wouldn't it be easier to have someone handling your schedule?"

She tilted her head slightly, considering his words. "Maybe. The Agency also offered me one. But I turned it down."

"Why?"

A small smile tugged at the corners of her lips, though it carried a certain nostalgia. "Because Hyesoo-unnie has been with me for twelve years."

Tianzhu didn't say anything, just listening as she continued.

"When my girl group disbanded six and a half years ago, things were rough. Work was scarce, and suddenly, I wasn't an idol anymore. I don't know what to do back then. After all, I'm a plainfolk, I didn't graduate from a great university, and my singing skills are quite mediocre. The only thing I'm confident in is my dancing skills... Our CEO is on the verge of pushing me to serve some VIP clients for investments. It was then..."

She let out a deep breath with her eyes still on the road. "During that time, Hyesoo-unnie saved me by bringing an investment. To save my career, she contacted her ex-husband and convinced him. But in exchange, her ex offered me a role in the drama, Princess in the Castle."

"Oh, yeah, I remember that one... My daughter likes it..." Tianzhu nodded in approval.

Chapter 798: Earth 1712: Conversations in the Car

Hye-rin let out a soft chuckle, her fingers tightening briefly on the wheel. "Yeah, I remember her. Anyway, that drama changed my life. I got more and more opportunities in dramas and movies. Eventually, I went from cameos and small roles to second leads and now even main leads... And I give the entire credit to my manager."

She took a slow breath before continuing. "I owe her a lot. So now that she finally has time to focus on her own life, I want her to take it easy. I don't want to rely on someone else when the person I trust the most isn't here."

Tianzhu nodded, understanding the sentiment.

Loyalty was something rare in the world, much less in the Entertainment industry, where money, fame, and opportunities matter more, whether it is for a celebrity or a manager.

It was something rare in this industry.

After another moment of quiet, he finally spoke. "She sounds like a good person."

Hye-rin smiled, glancing at him again. "She is."

The car continued its steady pace down the road, the conversation fading into another comfortable silence. But this time, it wasn't awkward anymore.

This time, it was Hye-rin who took the initiative to continue the conversation.

"Xueli-unnie told me you're from Novarusk." She glanced at him briefly before returning her focus to the road. "How are you adjusting here?"

Tianzhu let out a small chuckle and shook his head. "I'm not exactly from Siberia... I was born here and just moved there after graduation for career opportunities... And also because of the marriage..."

Keeping his expression casual, he pulled out his phone and scrolled through his gallery before handing it to Hye-rin.

On the screen was a picture of his kids. One of them, Hye-rin, was already recognized, but she feigned ignorance and reacted as if she was looking at the picture for the first time, widening her eyes as she glanced between the screen and Tianzhu. "I know that you have twin kids, but I didn't expect they were this big... You must have married very young."

Tianzhu leaned back against his seat and nodded. "Yeah. Both of them are 18 already..." Hye-rin's gaze softened. "Your daughter's looks were quite striking, I must."

"I guess she got the best of our looks combined," Tianzhu replied with a small smirk, taking back his phone.

Then, without much thought, he added, feeding her lies... "I married when I was 20. I was working for an oligarch back then... But after my wife died in childbirth, I quit the job and joined a company with fixed working hours. Worked there for 12 years, and after that, I opened a convenience store with my savings. And now that my children are big and my daughter wants to be in the Entertainment world, I had to relocate to my hometown, here to Hangzhou, and started working for Xueli-jiejie, whom I have known since childhood."

There was a brief pause before Hye-rin quietly said, "I'm sorry about the loss of your wife. I don't have kids, but I grew up in a single-parent household. My parents divorced and split us sisters; my younger sister went with my mom, and I stayed with my dad. He suffered quite a bit, raising me up. He couldn't go out with his friends, couldn't date girls and have serious relationships, couldn't go on trips, and it suffered him even more when I hit puberty... So, I know how tough it must have been for you, who even handled two kids on your own..."

Tianzhu shook his head, offering a reassuring smile. "It's alright. It's been a long time." At the same time, he felt touched in his heart, feeling that someone understood the suffering he went through without him having to say it.

However, her words almost brought silence between them again. The air between them felt a little heavier for a while, but fortunately, Hye-rin smoothly shifted the topic. "Anyway, you said your daughter wants to be in the Entertainment business. Does she want to become an actress or..."

Tianzhu replied right away. "An idol..."

Then after a brief pause, he exhaled, half-laughing. "She was gifted in fighting and to some extent, playing guitar, but she wants to join an agency as a trainee and become an idol. I fully support her though... I don't want her to become a hunter and risk her life anyway..."

Hye-rin grinned. "If she really wants to become an idol... well, she's got a long road ahead of her." She turned the wheel smoothly as the traffic light turned green. "Idol life isn't as glamorous as people think. I have been one, so, you can trust my words..."

Tianzhu tilted his head slightly, intrigued. "Go on."

Hye-rin smirked. "You sure? Once I start talking, I might not stop and you might regret asking me."

Tianzhu chuckled. "I don't mind. I need to know what I'm dealing with if my daughter insists on this. I wish to know how an Idol's life will be like."

Hye-rin smiled softly before letting out a short sigh. "Well, if I had to put briefly..." She tapped her fingers lightly against the steering wheel as if gathering her thoughts.

"It's... brutal."

Tianzhu raised an eyebrow. "Brutal?"

"Yeah," she chuckled dryly. "People only see the glitz and glamour, but the early years are hell."

She glanced at him briefly before turning her eyes back to the road. "Even for a group like ours, which had a mediocre fan base, we had to push ourselves to exhaustion. Daily practice was intense—hours of singing, dancing, and even acting training. And if you weren't naturally talented? Well... too bad. You had to work twice as hard and still couldn't expect a chance to debut."

Tianzhu listened quietly, his brows furrowing slightly.

"And then, there's the diet. It's the worst thing you can imagine," Hye-rin continued with a shake of her head. "You'd think companies would be strict in maintaining their artist in shape, but it isn't simply strictness. They forced us to go on extreme diets to maintain them. Some girls barely eat, like surviving on just one single apple and a banana, and water for all day. It was all about looking good on camera."

She cast him a side glance before adding, "Of course, face jobs are also a thing. Nose adjustments, Botox injections—everyone does something to fit the industry's beauty standards. Our faces have to be flawless all the time..."

Tianzhu hummed in acknowledgment, though he couldn't help but find it unsettling. "That sounds... exhausting and quite disturbing."

Hye-rin nodded. "It is. And the worst part? It doesn't get easier after the debut. If anything, it gets harder."

Tianzhu tilted his head. "How so?"

Hye-rin let out a soft chuckle, but this time, there was something nostalgic in her expression. "Once you debut, you start chasing fame, relevance, staying on top. The competition is brutal, and the industry is always looking for the next big thing. You can't afford to slack off. Cuz once you do, some other group will take away your spot. And without a strong, dedicated fanbase, a group will always have a risk of disbandment. No fanbase, no income. No income, the company will lose interest. No interest, no good songs. No good songs, no views, and a loss. When losses accumulate, the company will have no choice but to fire everyone or worse, force their artists to become escorts for their investors."

Tianzhu leaned back slightly, taking in her words. "Sounds like a never-ending battle." But in his head, he thought, "As long as Vera is skilled and money is poured in, she doesn't have to worry about anything. And with me around, there won't be anyone who will take advantage of her..."

"It is." Hye-rin's lips curled into a small, genuine smile. "But... you know what makes it worth it?"

Tianzhu glanced at her. "What?"

Her eyes softened as she spoke. "The cheers."

Tianzhu blinked.

"When you're on stage, under those bright lights, and you hear the crowd screaming your name... It's indescribable." She laughed lightly. "Those ten seconds, twenty seconds of applause—it makes everything worth it. That moment of pure energy, of knowing that people appreciate what you've worked so hard for... it motivates you like nothing else."

Tianzhu studied her expression—the way her eyes gleamed with both fondness and longing.

"Of course," she added after a pause, "as your fame grows and that kind of applause becomes normal, you kind of... lose the excitement. It becomes a routine, and you start looking for something else to chase." She shrugged. "It's just part of the cycle, I guess."

Tianzhu nodded to himself, his fingers tapping lightly against his knee. While he wondered what topic he should bring up to continue this conversation, a growl was heard from beside.

Tianzhu blinked. He turned his head slightly, and Hye-rin immediately turned red.

"Did you just—"

"No! That wasn't me!" she blurted out, looking anywhere but at him.

Tianzhu raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Lying only makes it worse."

Hye-rin groaned and covered her face with one hand, still keeping the other on the wheel. "Ugh. This is so embarrassing..."

Chuckling, Tianzhu leaned back in his seat. "Did you skip lunch?"

Chapter 799: Earth 1712: Escaping from Paparazzi

Hye-rin sighed. "Yeah. I was too focused on the shoot and didn't realize I was hungry until now."

Tianzhu nodded. "Same here."

Hye-rin hesitated for a moment before glancing at him. "Wanna grab something to eat?"

Tianzhu considered it. "I don't have any commitments right now, but if I were you, I wouldn't eat around this area."

Hye-rin frowned. "Why not?"

Instead of answering, Tianzhu tapped on the car's infotainment screen, switching it to the rear camera feed. The display flickered before revealing the street behind them—and one particular car that had been following them at a steady distance.

Tianzhu pointed at it. "That car's been tailing us since we left the studio."

Hye-rin's eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

"That car's been tailing us since we left the studio."

Hye-rin's eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

Tianzhu smirked. "Test it yourself. Change lanes and speed up."

Hye-rin blinked. "What?"

"Trust me. Just do it."

Biting her lip, Hye-rin did as he said. She flicked her turn signal, smoothly switching to the next lane before pressing down on the accelerator.

A second later, the car behind them did the same.

Hye-rin's grip tightened on the steering wheel. "Shit."

"Faster," Tianzhu instructed calmly, his eyes locked on the rearview mirror.

Hye-rin hesitated for a second before pressing down on the accelerator. The engine growled as the car surged forward. The vehicle behind them matched their speed, refusing to lose sight of them.

"Still there," Hye-rin muttered, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

Tianzhu remained unbothered. "Good. Now, keep going. Don't slow down."

The road ahead was clear. No traffic, no obstacles. Just open the highway.

Hye-rin's heart pounded in her chest as the speedometer climbed higher and higher. "Okay, now what?"

The moment they reached the edge of Exit 4, Tianzhu suddenly reached over and grabbed the wheel.

"What the—?!" Hye-rin barely had time to react before the car lurched sideways.

With expert precision, Tianzhu yanked the wheel, sending the vehicle into a sudden drift. The tires screeched against the asphalt, the car sliding into the exit lane at a sharp angle. Hye-rin instinctively slammed on the brakes, gripping the wheel for dear life.

The paparazzi car shot forward, unable to turn in time.

Hye-rin gasped as she watched them zoom past, missing the exit completely. The road ahead of them was empty. They were free.

Tianzhu leaned back with a small, satisfied smirk. "See? Told you."

Hye-rin sat frozen in her seat, her mouth slightly agape. "That... That was insane."

Tianzhu chuckled. "It's not that hard. You see these kinds of maneuvers in dramas all the time."

"Yeah, but I didn't think they actually worked in real life!"

"They do," Tianzhu said with a shrug. "Especially when you've had experience."

Hye-rin turned to him, eyes narrowing. "Experience? Are you saying you've been in car chases before?"

Tianzhu nodded, his expression unreadable. "A few."

Hye-rin blinked. "Wait—what?"

Tianzhu exhaled as if reminiscing. "Organized crime is pretty common in Siberia. If you know how to drive like this, people think twice before chasing you. They don't know if you're a criminal yourself or just someone they shouldn't mess with."

Hye-rin stared at him. "That's actually kind of badass."

Tianzhu gave a small smirk but said nothing.

As they drove forward, Hye-rin glanced at the rearview mirror. "Well, looks like we really lost them. No U-turns for at least three miles. They're stuck going forward."

Tianzhu nodded. "And we'll have to drive at least ten miles before we can find another exit."

Hye-rin sighed. "That's a huge detour."

Tianzhu chuckled. "Neither of us had urgent plans, did we?"

Hye-rin thought about it and realized he was right. They had time.

Tianzhu continued, "Besides, after all that running around at the photoshoot, you looked exhausted. Now, you seem pretty awake."

Hye-rin smiled at that. "You're right. I guess that little adrenaline rush woke me up."

For a moment, the tension eased, replaced by a quiet sense of amusement.

Hye-rin studied him from the corner of her eye. Tianzhu was definitely different from the usual road managers. Most people in his position were either nervous or overly respectful around celebrities, afraid of saying the wrong thing. But Tianzhu? He acted as if he belonged in this world. As if none of it fazed him.

Maybe it was because he had been around someone like Xueli.

Or maybe it was because he had lived in a foreign country.

Whatever the reason, there was a confidence in him that felt... intriguing.

And, to her own surprise, Hye-rin found that confidence a little bit charming.

They finally found a quiet restaurant on the outskirts of the city—one of those cozy, family-run places where the late afternoon hours left most tables empty. It was the perfect place to avoid prying eyes.

Hye-rin sat across from Tianzhu, stretching her arms. "I didn't realize how hungry I was until now," she admitted with a small laugh.

Tianzhu smiled slightly as he picked up the menu. "Stress does that to you."

As they waited for their food, their conversation flowed naturally.

Tianzhu shared pieces of his life in Novarusk—the challenges of working as a security chief for an Oligarch, the complex scandals he had handled for the family, and the near-death experiences he faced while protecting them.

Of course, none of it was true.

These were just carefully crafted stories designed to protect his real past. But Hye-rin listened with genuine interest, her eyes widening at certain points.

"That sounds intense," she remarked. "You must be missing action a lot."

Tianzhu shrugged, "Not really, I wasn't the man I was two decades ago. Back then, I was young and full of vigor and ambition. I lived recklessly. Now, I'm already 39 and just only had my kids' future in my head."

Hye-rin leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand. "But you don't really look 39. You look like you are in your late twenties... And your stamina is just as high as other high-ranking Hunters..."

"Hmm? How do you..." Tianzhu blinked in surprise but then remembered their first encounter, "Oh, I forgot that you saw me at the gym..."

"Not just the gym..." She replied almost instinctively, but then murmured, "Anyway... my film has finished post-production and is going to premiere very soon. I'm not a lead role, but they promised me 10 tickets. If you are interested, I'll send a ticket to you."

That piqued Tianzhu's interest. "Really? What's it about?"

Hye-rin brightened at the chance to talk about her work. "It's basically a courtroom drama. I play a civil servant, working for the male lead. Can't give any spoilers, but I have almost a combined screen time of about 32 minutes, although I stay with the male lead most of the time. So, you can just see me in almost the entire movie. And if this works, they planned on the sequel, too, where I was promised a second lead..."

Tianzhu nodded. "Sounds interesting. So, when does it come out?"

Hye-rin sighed. "Next week."

Tianzhu gave a nod with a smile, "You can bet that I will be there..."

"Thanks..."

After a while, their food arrived, and they ate while exchanging more stories. The conversation was easy, unforced. By the time they were done, the earlier tension from the paparazzi chase had completely disappeared from her mind.

After finishing their meal, Hye-rin drove Tianzhu to the bus stop.

As the car slowed to a stop, Tianzhu unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to her, "Thanks for the meal. And for the ride."

Hye-rin smiled. "No problem. You kind of saved my life back there, so I guess we're even."

Tianzhu chuckled. "Not exactly life and death, but I'll take it."

He stepped out of the car, closing the door behind him. Before walking away, he leaned down slightly and said, "See you around, Miss Lee. It's nice knowing you."

Hye-rin watched him go to the bus stop and stood there before driving off.

It wasn't until she got home, kicked off her heels, and sank into her couch that a thought struck her. "Oh, shit... I didn't get his number."

For a second, she debated messaging Xueli to ask, but then she shook her head.

"That's fine. We are in the same field. We will bound to run into each other again..." she muttered to herself.

Two months later;

Krasinostok City, Drakamir Republic, Eastern Siberia;

In the living room that was usually filled with the noise from the television now filled with the shuffle of papers as reports were laid out across the table.

Sungjun sat at the head, sleeves rolled up, and collar loose. His eyes scanned the files one by one — casualty counts, territory gains, reconstruction plans. Every so often, he'd tap the table with his pen, and he wasn't satisfied at the moment.

Seongha entered the mansion alone. Sungjun gave a brief glance at her, but continued to read the reports and spoke, "Hey there..."

"Oppa, you seemed busy?" She asked.

Chapter 800: Earth 1712: Sungjun in the Prison (Part-1)

Sungjun gestured for her to sit.

Opposite him, Seongha leaned back on the couch, one leg crossed over the other, and stared at him sharply, and spoke. "Oppa, Pavel got its missing rdx, a week ago, isn't it?"

Sungjun nodded while still having his gaze on the reports.

Seongha continued to speak sharply. "We defeated Black Dragon and all of its 14 allies in the war, gaining control over 37 cities in various countries of southern Siberia. The war was officially over 3 days ago, wasn't it?"

He nodded silently again.

"Yesterday, Pavel also made the announcement and distributed the gains to your subordinate gangs, didn't you?"

As Sungjun silently nodded again, she then spoke. "Then, when will the promise you gave to me be upheld?"

Sungjun finally reacted. He closed the file, placed it aside, and leaned back, lips curling into a small smile. "Nothing to worry about," he said, looking at her. "The boss already went in person the moment your task was done."

Seongha blinked. "Boss? What do you mean?"

Sungjun's eyes glinted strangely in response— like light refracting through glass. Then, a moment later, his entire body went to transform.

Before she let out three breaths, he transformed into someone else, an old man in his 70s who had a rough face but a calm gaze. Seongha instantly recognized the person. It was the mansion steward who had been here since the former lord's days.

Seongha froze. "What... Steward Zhang?" she whispered, standing up slowly. "Where's Alex-oppa?"

The man smiled faintly and got up. He turned to the window, hands clasped behind his back, the sunlight outlining the faint scar running along his neck.

"Your father will be free soon," he added. "The Boss promised you, and you have been seeing him since your childhood. He doesn't make promises that he can't keep."

Seongha stared at him, her heartbeat thundered in her ears as something terrifying clicked in her head. "Don't tell me..."

Meanwhile, far away from the location, in northern Siberia's Velmira nation, Sungjun was seen in a prison uniform, stepping through the narrow corridor with his hands cuffed in front of him. The orange prison uniform hung loosely from his frame, with his sleeves rolled halfway up. His eyes seemed quite calm, for someone walking inside one of the strongest prisons in the entire world.

Beside him, a prison guard walked lazily, swinging a baton at his side.

The long corridor smelled faintly of disinfectant and rust. The faint echo of shouting from another block carried through the vents — laughter, cursing, metal scraping against metal.

When they reached the last cell, the guard tapped a code into the keypad. A low buzz followed, then the door slid open with a groan.

Inside, the cell was dimly lit by a single bulb overhead, looking exactly like any typical cell one would see in the movies. The space was narrow — two bunks, a sink, a small steel toilet in the corner.

However, the cell wasn't empty. Sitting on the lower bunk was a man, huge with muscles thick like cords under his tanned skin, and his arms covered in scars and faint tattoo lines that vanished under his sleeves.

As Sungjun entered after his anti-mana cuffs were removed, the man's eyes lifted slowly, and for a second, Sungjun thought he was looking at a bear. It reminded him of Grime, one of the eight generals of Pavel.

Meanwhile, the guard chuckled, giving Sungjun a forceful shove on his back. "Lucky you," he said, voice dripping with sarcasm. "You just got assigned to the worst cell in the block."

Sungjun stumbled forward a step due to the sudden push, catching himself against the frame of the bunk. He instinctively looked up — the big man hadn't moved, still staring at him and unblinking.

The guard then slammed the door shut with a metallic clang.

As the footsteps faded away, Sungjun straightened his posture, rubbing his wrists where the anti-mana cuffs had chafed earlier. He didn't speak at first and just looked around. The cell smelled faintly of sweat and damp metal. For a long moment, the two men just stared at each other.

The big man on the bunk shifted his leg to the side, stretching lazily. Then he turned his head, giving Sungjun a curious glance, half a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "A Zhonggou guy?" he said, his voice deep, mocking, yet oddly casual. "Huh. Don't see many of your kind here in Siberia, much less in the underworld. So, what'd you do to end up in Level 2? Smuggling goods or drugs? I highly doubt it is weapons thought. Your skin is too smooth for that kind of sht..."

Sungjun didn't answer that.

Instead, as planned, he started walking forward, slow and steady, with his eyes locked on the man like a predator measuring distance. The air between them thickened, the bulb above flickering once as if even the light hesitated to stay on.

The man frowned at this newcomer's behavior. "What—" he got up to his feet, looking down...

However, before he could even finish, Sungjun stopped right in front of him. He had to tilt his chin up slightly — the guy was enormous, at least seven feet and five inches tall, his physique comparable to that of professional wrestlers.

Sungjun then looked straight into his eyes and said flatly, "I don't like your eye level."

The man blinked, confused. "What?"

"Kneel," Sungjun said.

The silence that followed lasted barely a second before the big man's face twisted into anger. "The hell did you just say, you little—!"

He swung a punch with his large fist, but Sungjun shifted slightly, letting the fist cut through empty air. His expression didn't even flicker. In the same motion, he drew in a quiet breath, pushing mana deep into his bones, and then he struck back.

It was a simple, short, brutal punch. And when it landed square in the man's ribs, the sound appeared wet and sharp — like someone snapping a thick branch. The big man's eyes went wide as saliva and air burst from his mouth. His massive body flew backward, crashing against the steel bed rail before sliding to the floor with a grunt.

He wheezed, clutching his side, trying to get air back into his lungs.

Sungjun then walked up to him slowly with a calm face but looked terrifying for this giant.

He stopped above him and said quietly, "This is how our eyes should meet."

The man looked up, panting with a mix of pain and disbelief spreading across his features. Sungjun crouched slightly, speaking in a low but clear voice in a Siberian local accent. "If you still don't understand the difference between us... I'll take my time teaching you."

He raised his right hand, flexing his fingers once — the same hand that had dropped him, and then continued speaking. "For your earlier question, I was arrested for smuggling drugs, but this hand... has killed dozens. Those people aren't some innocent bystanders or weaklings who couldn't protect themselves. Every one of them I killed was a gangster who thought power came from shouting louder."

He tilted his head slightly, narrowing his eyes. "So if you understand," he said, "Accept your place first and then answer my questions."

The guy nodded like a chicken, gulping his saliva as his heart rate spiked up in fear.

Sungjun's voice hardened as he interrogated his cellmate, easing down onto the lower bunk as if the metal frame were a throne. "Who are you? And what's your story?"

The big man sat up but continued to kneel and wiped a smear of blood from his lip with the back of his hand. After staring at Sungjun for a long beat, he answered, or atleast tried to answer as honestly as possible in a steady tone, masking his fear.

"Sir, my name's Steve Smith. Used to be with the Iron Brotherhood until the cops made sure there wasn't much left of us." He shrugged, like listing the weather. "After that, I shifted to weapons smuggling. Ruled the profession for a few years before getting caught in a police operation. I was sentenced to twelve years. Been five in this place."

Taking a pause, he flexed his fingers as he further said, "Also, I don't like subordinates because of a lack of trust in this place. But I got a few who still listen and have generated enough reputation over the years to stay unbothered. With me around, at the very least, nobody's gonna bother you right from the start."

Sungjun studied him for a moment, seeing the confidence in this man's eyes. Then he stood and walked to the cell bars. "Stand," he said after a moment, without looking back.

Steve rose without hesitation, like he'd been rehearsing the motion for years. He planted his feet squarely, waiting for an order.

Sungjun then turned, the light catching the corner of his jaw. "I need you to tell me everything about this place," he said plainly. "Gangs, troublemakers, the ones we can use, the ones we avoid. Which guards look the other way, and which will beat you for even spitting?"

Steve nodded once, slow and sure.