

The Middleman's Love



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คิวเตอร์ กรภัทร์

ไม้
Mai

เจต
Jade

อิม ปริญญารณ

พี่เจต
คนกลาง

THE MIDDLEMAN'S LOVE

Preface

From the heart of the author

How does a person who has always been a bridge for other people feel about being in the middle?

That was the first question that popped up in my head when I started plotting a new novel. And that was the beginning of the title *The Middleman's Love*

Our protagonist is an ordinary guy with no special looks and special skills, which contrasts drastically to all of his best friends. This turns him into a bridge or a path for people to get to their goals. This happens so regularly that he's got used to it and puts up the wall between himself and his own expectation. The story begins when an intern who is six years younger than him arrives with an ambition of tearing down that wall.

Mai is gentle and warm, but he can be a bit cunning when he wants to. He can also be stubborn like a teenager, while Jade is more mature. Jade is optimistic and has a generous heart. He is always kind to those around him. That personality is more

important than his appearance, and it makes Mai fall in love with him.

If you read all the way to the end, you would agree with Mai that Jade is really *adorable*.

This novel was created with a feeling of doubt and uncertainty of my own proficiency. It is a novel that helps me grow up, develop myself to another step, and unlock many boundaries I set upon my heart. I've always been happy writing this story.

I must confess I didn't expect so many people to read and love it on the websites. It's heartwarming to see so much love and cheers from the readers, and I really appreciate that. I give my big gratitude to Deep Publishing for its interest in this novel. Big thanks to @Shimotsuki04 for drawing beautiful illustrations for the book. Last of all, I hope you enjoy the story.

Are you excited now? Go ahead and turn the next page!

May all of your everyday be full of smiles

littlebear96

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One of my days

Right at this moment, I'm stuck in quite an uncomfortable situation.

"Jade, can you pass these brownies to King for me, please?"

'Mint', a recently graduated and new charming staff member of our company, hands me a big box of brownies with a blushing smile. I'm not quite sure if the heavy red on her cheeks is from a little too much blush she puts on or if she is shy. To make it worse, those puppy eyes make it difficult to say no.

"I made these myself, you know. If King likes it, I can always bring more," she continues lively as we walk into the elevator.

I push the elevator button to the 15th floor where my office is located before giving a simper to Mint.

"Yes..."

“But I guess many people are attracted to him, right? Many girls must’ve asked you to give him their gifts like this before.”

“Well, not really.” I just have to go through this five times a day.

“You really need to put the brownies right into his hand. I *really* want him to try them out. I made some for you too, but don’t touch the big box. Yours are in the little box.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“I’m leaving now. Thanks for the favor!”

When the elevator’s doors open up, she walks right out happily, leaving me with a big brownie box and a cup of coffee.

I sigh exhaustedly before following her out. Just three steps after I clock into the office, I get called again.

“Jade!”

Great. Who is it now?

“Can you take this lemon iced tea to Uea? I’ve heard he likes it.”

My senior ‘Pong’ from the sales department stops in front of me and hands me a cup from the ‘Green Mermaid Coffee Shop’.

I nod repeatedly at him, trying to focus on what he’s saying.

“Make sure he gets to drink it. Got it?”

“Yes, yes.”

I give him my word and now I’m free to walk further to the

IT department, put my backpack down and fall onto my chair. I exhale abundantly loudly.

My name is 'Jadeniphat'. My nickname is just Jade. (My mom was too lazy to come up with anything creative. Can it just be like that?) I'm twenty-seven years old. Now I'm an IT department member in a company in Phrom Phong. My job is a graphic designer, a normal salary earner like everyone else – a kind of people who drink Starbucks coffee at the beginning of the month, but can afford only a twenty-baht black coffee from a street vendor in front of the office at the end of the month.

Such an ordinary life, same old ordinary me. But I guess if there's one thing extraordinary about me, it is that...

I'm always a middleman.

By that, I don't mean I live in the middle of the city. Well, I can say I do live in the middle of Thailand. My house is in Nonthaburi, and I've been studying in Bangkok since childhood. Anyway, the middleman means, in any circumstances, I'm always the one in the middle.

How middle of all I can be? Let me tell you the whole story.

I'm the middle child in a Thai-Chinese family. My face is neutral – not that handsome but not that bad looking either. Let's say it's easy to find someone like me on the streets. My grades were so-so. I can play some sports; the same goes, I'm not great but not that horrible. After graduating and working for many years,

my position is still in the middle level.

The only thing in my life that isn't in the middle is probably a low base salary as if it doesn't want to increase, but I won't blame the boss. Well, I know that the economy is currently horrible. If you really need to blame someone, then perhaps Thai govern-- Ahem! Nothing actually. (My tongue has always been sharp. Please don't ban me right off the start.)

It's a little depressing how I can do anything but never bring the best out of it. The Buddha told us to stay on the path of balance, but isn't this a little too damn balanced? I just want to be able to go all the way at something. Or if I was cursed to do anything just at this level, at least can I have the most handsome face to stay balanced?

But no, I just look like a typical Thai-Chinese man, not the ideal Asian internet idol type that gets popular on social media.

That just sounds even more depressing.

Back to me being the middleman, like I said earlier, my specialty is being way too ordinary, so I'm not quite sure if the fact that all the people around me are so special is my good or bad luck. My elder brother is handsome, crazy tall like a model, and damn smart at studying. My little sister is also a cutie that all the guys chase. Not to mention my two best friends that look way better than me. It just sums up that everyone around me has the looks and the skills in the premium level...

Zoom on me now...who is just...a superordinary guy.

Don't get me wrong, it's not jealousy. I know getting jealous won't make me better anyway, and I'm usually not the type to overthink, so I never felt blue about it. Still, my life is a great big mess because of cool people around me.

Now all the folks want to get close to the people around me *through* me. All. The. Time.

Ever since school, I had to answer the questions from the boys that had a crush on my sister, and the girls that had a crush on my brother. The juniors and seniors also wanted to hit on my best friends. I had an experience of them approaching me, asking and caring about me until my heart skipped a beat, then they ended up asking about my close ones and if I could pass something over to them.

I'm being serious, if you were in my position, you'd be fed up with all this too.

Is it because I'm too friendly, easily approachable, and easy to talk to? Is that why they all give these snacks, drinks, little gifts, and blah blah blah to my siblings and friends? The situation has been like this since I was in primary school until now. Sometimes it gets me wondering – do they see me as a Lineman or Grab? Can't you just carry this stuff to them by yourself?

A middleman, a bridge, or whatever you want to call; that person is me — this Jade right here.

It's kind of a bummer that these people approach me for an advantage, but at least I get many gifts of gratitude from

being their delivery man and informant. I get plenty of great food, sometimes gift cards, and discount coupons for the movies. Even on a night out, these random people pay my bills just to hang around my close ones.

Well, that's good enough for my bank account.

I'm not that greedy, but in this economic situation, you need to take what you can get.

For example, Mint got me this very special, separated, little brownie box today. As for Pong, he's been using my delivery service with no charges for a while now. I guess I've got to collect the shipping fee a bit.

I can't say I enjoy my life like this, but I can't say I hate it either. I've been through this for more than ten years, and I've got used to it by now. I'm lucky enough that my brother and I didn't study in the same university; that reduced a few gifts I had to deliver. Now he's married and became a father. The only single people left are my sister and my best friends.

What about my romantic life you might ask?

None. How could anyone fall for such an ordinary guy with nothing special, right? It doesn't bother me that much. I just get a bit sad when some girls in the office call my name in such a sweet voice just to end up saying...

Can you please give this to King?

Sometimes I hate their guts. Just watch me, I'll make merit with beautiful flowers every single day so that in the next

life I will be as handsome as a hero of ten novels combined. I'll have a big group of fans chasing me the whole day!

I sit doing nothing...at my desk...for a few minutes, then I finally turn on my computer. After that, I stand up to put all the souvenirs on my friend's desk and start eating stir-fried basil with rice I bought for my breakfast. My colleagues gradually arrive at the office and I greet them cheerfully.

"Hey, Jade! Don't choke on the food and die. If you became a ghost, how the hell could I finish all the work up at nighttime?"

"Wow! You sure have a-- Kaff!-- big mouth-- Kaff! Kaff!"

Maybe I'm a bit too hyper. Now I'm coughing up on my breakfast. My nose hurts like hell. Friendly reminder: don't talk while your mouth is full.

I decide to keep quiet through my meal. After I'm done, I get off my desk to clean up. Once I return, I found that the owner of the desk next to mine is already here.

"What's this?" he asks in a monotone that never lives up to the standard of his looks and stares at me with an unusual stern glare.

"Pong bought it for you." I jerk my face to the cup of lemon iced tea on his desk.

This is Anon, or who all the boys in my office call 'little brother Uea', my colleague in the IT department and my roommate back in university, another important person that messes up my life because of how charming he is.

Uea is slender. His skin crazily glows like a typical Thai northerner. He is tall. His waist and hips are clearly defined in the exact ideal bottom. Because of his looks, especially his big round brown eyes that are as sweet as a doe, many people are attracted to him. But he's picky as hell and never stays in a relationship for too long. He would go out with someone for a while, find some excuses, and toss them off.

So basically he's so handsome (or beautiful?) that he can be as picky as he wants.

"You just take it." Uea stares at the lemon iced tea in less than a second before looking away and pushing the cup to me.

"Hey, come on. He specifically bought it for you. At least take a sip of it." I tell him, but my hand goes straight for the cup with a hidden smile.

This should both cure my thirst and help me save up the coins in my wallet.

"I don't take stuff from strangers," he says and starts ignoring me.

I shrug and walk back to my desk, quickly drink up the lemon iced tea to destroy the evidence before Pong finds out.

This is my morning routine. I just eat the leftovers from Uea. No wonder why he's always in shape while I'm right over here with cheeks expanding every single day.

"You're not gonna give in a 'lil?" He's been hitting on you for two months," I say after getting rid of the evidence. Now I'm

back on my seat, resting my chin on my hand and staring at my crazy hot friend.

He scoffs.

“You know I don’t play with anyone in the office. It complicates things.”

“Oh, that’s right! The exact same life motto as King. You two are--”

“Who’s talking shit about me this early in the morning?”

A hoarse voice interrupts. I turn around and see my other close friend approaching.

“Yours is on the desk, King.” I point at his desk not too far away.

King raises his eyebrows a little bit. He walks over to grab the box and walks back to me.

“Who’s it from?”

“The new employee, Mint. Accounting.”

“Oh, the one with rosy cheeks? Yeah, she’s cute.” He smiles and bites a mouthful piece of brownie.

This guy right here is called Khunakorn or King. He’s a programmer and also an important person in my life. I knew him since kindergarten. Our houses were next to each other, and we went to the same school. Eventually, we parted ways in university.

He’s another person who has a very good-looking face. He’s six feet tall, making the five something like me and Uea

look like a midget standing next to him. This guy is the one who brings me headaches the most. Not only I have to answer questions from the girls and the boys who fall for him, I also have to confront all the brokenhearted people who got dumped by him, for him!

He's a player. He isn't serious in dating anyone, but there are many people who want to be serious with him because he is rich. Thus, the unlucky person appears to be me. Since I'm his friend, all the girls and the boys chase after me every day to ask me about him.

I can just watch them with my eyes, while King can touch them with his hands. Do you know what I mean? Not only that. Damn it! I'm still unlucky enough to be called and yelled at by some girls. Sometimes they even suddenly show up at the office. However, King who is the cause of the problem still does whatever he pleases. If they're hot, and if they flirt back, they're his. And when he's bored, he slips away from their grips like the wind. Well, the person who's in charge of this kind of situation is me.

Is he my friend or the karma from my past life?

"The taste is good, but it's too damn sweet. You can have the rest of them."

He puts the box of the eleven leftover pieces of brownies on my desk and walks back to his desk.

I stare at the delicious looking brownies for quite some time, then I take a big bite of it. The sweet flavor lingers in my

mouth.

Never mind getting diabetes; we shouldn't throw away such good dessert.

"Uea, you want some?" I ask him, holding up a piece of brownie with M&M topping.

He gives it a glance and never again.

"You go ahead."

"You can't take your words back now." I hurriedly put the box in the drawer even though I know he doesn't want a single bite ever.

Talking about my two friends, they are the opposite of each other. Uea is stone-cold towards anything. He's a bit arrogant with a mix of rich kid attitude. He says everything straight forwardly and doesn't seem easily approachable, but that's just the wall he puts up. He's kind-hearted. He's just not good at saying it out.

But King's very cunning. On the outside he's full of smile, but inside he's hot like hellfire. His mischievous grin hides all his thoughts. It's almost impossible to tell who he likes and dislikes. You might see him speaking well, but on the inside, he might find a way to slaughter you. He's good at wearing all the masks.

For me, like I explained, I just try to keep it chill. I'm too lazy to be overthinking. Many times I've been taken advantages by some of my friends – both knowingly and unknowingly. When I was in university, Uea was very supportive of me. He was my

guardian angel. Just his death stare could set goosebumps on anyone.

That includes me. I also have goosebumps when he does that. His eyes might seem sweet, but the stare is like a death sentence. Why so feisty?

“I ran into Bas on my way to the room. He told me the new interns were here.”

Uea says in his plain voice, making me sigh exhaustedly.

It’s that time of the year again, the intern training festival!

My company accepts interns every year, but the numbers are various. I shouldn’t be upset about it since I also used to be an intern back when I was a university student, but it’s just so goddamn boring teaching kids all stuff. If I got lucky, the kids would be quite smart, but some years when I found a not-quite-smart intern, I can tell you it was troublesome. They didn’t help me in any ways. It was me having to help them with their job. I used to help them do almost everything – so much that I’d like to tell them to give me some credits when they were going to do the presentation in front of the class.

But of course, there’s no way I will say anything like that. I’d end up feeling bad for them. At least, I think of it as helping them complete their studies

Since there are only Uea, me and another senior who isn’t quite enthusiastic in the graphic department; Bas who is my boss and a temporary IT manager often assigns me and Uea to be the

supervisors for the interns. We will decide later who will be the main one, who teaches, who checks, and who takes care of their mental health. If you get the good interns, they can really help you out.

“Last year I was a supervisor, so now it’s your turn.”

I burst it out of the blue, still feeling the tiredness from last year. Last year I asked an intern to lend me a hand. In the end, the work came out so horrible that I had retouch it a lot. So this year let me rest in peace and not in pieces.

“Sure,” Uea replies.

I blink in a daze when he agrees with it more easily than I expected.

“Why weren’t you always like this?” I ask.

He looks back at me, doesn’t say anything and just smirks.

“Uea’s already seen the intern’s profile – the future class honors student. He just wants to keep the guy with him.”

I finally get it once King walks in and gives me an answer. That’s why Uea agreed so easily, he knew the young guy is great.

So what? I still need to check this and that for them. I’m too lazy. It’s more convenient if I just work alone.

“You shut up,” Uea says while staring at King coldly. King smiles back and goes back to his work.

Their relationship is quite... Hmm... What do I say?

They just got introduced to each other at work. They’ve walked past each other before when we were in university, but

that's it. They got close when Uea quit his old workplace and I invited him to work here. So their relationship is probably like a friend of a friend, something like that. Plus, Uea gets annoyed easily, and King likes to be a pain in the ass. So there's this little tension between them on some occasions – just a little (?). The middleman that eases the tension off for them is, of course, me.

See? I'm even a middleman for my best friends. Jesus.

We sit and work on our own for a while. When it reaches 9 AM, Bas and our manager walk into the room.

"This year, the IT department only got one intern to work with the graphic designers. Here, introduce yourself to your seniors."

The manager's voice causes me to lean past a desk partition and look at the main door. There, I see a tall guy in a university uniform. I can feel the excitement in the whisper of the girls in the office.

No wonder why all the girls have that reaction. That guy is out-of-the-world handsome. He is super tall and has got white smooth skin, looking like a Korean star or so. His noble aura spreads out everywhere. I'm a guy, but I can't deny he's crazy good-looking. So how can the girl not wheeze?

"Hello, my name is Phakin Shaopaphakorn. You can call me Mai. It's a pleasure to meet all of you."

Wow, that voice is incredibly deep. I can see the programmer girls melting. The young guy smiles politely, glancing around

before stopping at us.

My instinct made me look at Uea automatically.

Damn. That guy's not going to look anywhere other than this way now, is he? My friend is targeted again.

I sit and stare at Uea who's still got that deadpan face, then switch to the face of the young man who is standing in front of the room. He's still staring this way. I understand Uea is way too hot to handle; but c'mon, hold your horses. We have to work together for another four months.

"Well, you'd better take good care of him. Who's the responsible one here?" the manager asks, followed by a familiar voice of someone.

"It's Jadeniphat this year, sir," King says.

"Yeah--" I agree with him thoughtlessly, then I realize that's my name!

I look at him immediately. King raises his eyebrows at me. The hell is this?! Why did he poke his nose into this?!

"Take good care of him, Mr Jadeniphat," the manager says.

"Uh, sir?"

"What?"

The middle-aged man gives me an annoyed look. I hold back my words that are going to slip out immediately.

"Well, never mind, sir."

I smile awkwardly and hear King's faint laugh from behind. I turn around to give him a death stare, then turn back right away

when Bas comes with the new intern.

“So you take care of him, eh? Then you’d better take good care, alright? I’ve got a meeting coming up, let’s catch up later.”

Bas pushes the young guy to me and casually walks off the scene, leaving me speechless amongst the wheezing of the ladies.

“Well, in these upcoming four months, I’ll definitely look forward to coming to the office every day.” ‘Fai’, one of the seniors of the department, chuckles.

I see the girls staring at ‘Mai’. When he looks back, they all get flushed and look the other way.

“He’s just arrived, and you start flirting with him already? I guess I was forgotten now that you have a shiny new thing,” King mutters. He acts all sad, but his face looks delighted as if he can finally escape from her.

“Oh, come on. You always have a special room in my heart, but there are four rooms in the heart, so now Mai is taking over the other one. Hi, my name is Fai. It’s so great to meet you.”

Fai, the big sassy senior and the IT support worker, blinks with her false eyelashes bouncing quickly, sending sweet eyes to the new intern, while Mai just stands there with a smile.

“Stop now before he runs away with fear.”

I say and stand up from the chair. I suddenly get all insecure, because side-to-side, Mai is much taller than me. What are parents feeding their kids these days? Why are they all so

goddamn tall?

“My name’s Jade,” I say. “Next to me here is Uea. We’re graphic designers. Actually, there’s one more, ‘Mongkon’, but he takes a day off.”

I introduce us all, and the new intern greets back with both hands together like a prayer – the basic and simple Thai way of greeting. Then he smiles politely at me.

“Hi, guys.”

His deep voice gets me jealous. How can someone be that perfect? He’s already good-looking even with a dead face, but when he smiles, it is like there is an aura of angel around him. His voice is also pleasing to anyone’s ears. Why do you need to be this attractive?

“Just relax. And-- ugh-- I’m not your supervisor. My friend just messed with me. Your real supervisor is--”

“Just keep it that way. We’ve already told the manager,” Uea suddenly interjects. He turns to look at me with a straight face. “You take care of him.”

Hold up. You can just do that?

“Take him, Jade, so you’ll have someone to help your job,” King says.

I almost want to take the brownie box out of the drawer and hit him in the head. Take him your ass!

I breathe in and out slowly, trying to get it all together. I try to pray in my heart to quell the anger. Though I’m mad as hell,

I need to keep my cool, or else the intern won't respect me as a senior. Besides, if I don't agree to all of this, it might hurt the young guy's feelings...like *why are none of the seniors want to take me in*. So, fine.

"I can actually help all of you. Whatever you want me to do, just say it out."

The young guy says as he looks around. His eyes stop at Uea at the exact moment Uea looks up and their eyes meet.

Two attractive people look at each other, and all the ordinary guy like me can do is look at them with a dry smile, trying not to show much expression.

Here goes.

Seems I'm getting stuck in the same old deja vu again.

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A kid in a care

Though I'm not quite happy of being 'a bridge' for everyone, at least I'm good enough not to ruin other people's love, especially those who are younger.

"I'll sit here."

I say as I clear the messy desk next to Uea's before putting a laptop that is not in use by anyone on the desk, then I smile kindly at Mai who's standing by my side.

Because he definitely sets his eyes on my friend – seeing that his eyes seem to never leave Uea – as a good supervisor, I should offer him what he wants. Part of it, I feel a bit pity for the guy. Maybe one day he'll remember me being a wingman and bring me some yummy snacks.

Hey, I'm not doing this because of my gluttony. It's just an idea popping up in my head.

“Um...” Mai mutters with hesitation. He turns to me who just stand there, looking proud of my middleman skill. He tries to say something.

“Anything wrong?” I ask.

“You’re making him sit here then how the hell are you gonna teach him about the job?” Uea asks.

I’m speechless. Yeah, I completely forgot about that.

My eyebrows are tied in a knot before they quickly loosen. I smile and say casually.

“Well, the desk next to mine is Mongkon’s desk. There’s no other empty space left except next to you there. How about you teach him instead, Uea? Then I don’t have to go back and forth between my desk and Mai’s.”

I say with a hidden shipper smile. Not only the young guy gets to hook up with the one he sets his eyes on, I also don’t have to take care of him. Damn. I’m such a genius!

“Well. If so, I’ll move over.”

An unexpected reply comes from Uea’s mouth, making me all confused. I stand there stupidly while watching Uea gathering his stuff.

“Hold on, hold on. You’re moving? For what? That’s wasting time for no reason,” I say.

“You trying to stop me is a waste of time too. Just put Mai at my desk so you can teach him easily,” he says in a monotone.

I stand there and look at my friend who is moving things

without listening to my objection. I peek at Mai who's been looking at me and say sorry to him in my mind.

Fine, at least not all failed. He still gets to sit next to Uea on one side though I'm right on the other side. Don't be too sad, kid.

Five minutes pass and the desk moving phase is now over. Mai sits down next to me with a smile.

"What do you want me to do, senior Jade?"

"Just Jade. Well, first turn on your laptop. I'll show you some references of works we've done," I say. He follows in an instant.

I secretly glance at Mai's hand as he reaches for the button to turn on the computer. He has a big and long finger, and his skin looks smooth.

Good-looking people even have good-looking fingers.

I create a business email account for him and send him the files of work I've done so he can understand the nature of our jobs. I spend the whole morning on explaining the scope of the work. Since our company is not that big, the range of work we have to do is quite wide. I assign him to do the cover image for the company's main page, then I check my email.

I see the portfolio of the Mai's work. His skill is very impressive. All details are covered. I can tell that he doesn't only use the basic program to finish up his work, but also uses other editing tools. He seems to be eager to learn more – more eager

than me for sure, because I don't even know how to use some of the tools he uses.

I sign out of my email and focus on the poster for the advertisement I'm working on. Mai pokes his head to ask me some questions periodically.

"Does this look alright, brother Jade?"

"That's actually really good. Hey, Uea, whatcha thinking about his layout?" I ask Uea who has been in silence for a while.

He gives the iconic one second glance and replies.

"Yeah, it's good."

I can't hide a smile when I notice the young man's expression that seems to gain more confidence. How can a compliment from the normal me compare to the one from the guy he likes? I understand you, kid.

"The background is a little too off; maybe make it a little darker," Uea suggests and turns back to his work.

I look at Mai, expecting to see a smile or starry eyes, but he just smiles politely and edits his work normally.

Huh, he's not ordinary, is he? He keeps his cool so well, but I know he crushes on my friend for sure. This Jade right here is a looker Imma tell you. This is because I've watched *Detective Conan* throughout my childhood. Come to think of it, I'm almost thirty now, and the story is still ongoing.

I can only hope that I won't die before Aoyama-sensei finishes writing the story.

Mai looks more relaxed after being complimented. He asks me this and that a little more. At first, he was just at his desk, now he moves his laptop to my desk to let me see it better. That's not just it, he drags his chair close to mine, basically using my desk now. The distance between us is now all gone. I don't know how to act in this situation, so I just blink again and again.

Does he lack warmth from home or something? Why don't you just sit on my lap then?

I exhale tiredly, accepting the way things are. At the same time, I get lost by the pretty face of this damn guy who's focusing on his laptop. Maybe he's this close because I'm a supervisor, or I have a friendlier face than Uea who I believe doesn't know how to move muscles on his face.

Hmm... Maybe he's too shy to approach Uea. Being too close with the one he has a crush on must be difficult. Why didn't I think of that?

I peek at Mai's face again in disbelief. He sure looks like a confident type, but is he this shy when it comes to romance? But we can't really judge someone by their appearance. People with pretty faces but bad personalities are easy to find, and people with normal looks with the kindest heart are also everywhere. To make an assumption based on appearance is nonsense to me.

"Guys! Time for lunch," Fai shouts.

I take my eyes off the screen to see the clock that says exactly 12 PM. That makes me want to tease her.

“Why don’t you arrive at the office exactly on time like this?”

“Shut your mouth, Jade. I announce right on time with good intention so that you folks won’t overwork and starve to death. Hey, Mai, you wanna go out and have lunch with me? Let me treat you.”

She gives him shiny eyes. Mai smiles dryly, then looks at me as if he’s asking for help.

“No, no. He’s a kid in my care. If you wanna take him, you need to pay a price. Like the bride’s price.”

“Bride’s price your ass. Don’t keep him to yourself.”

“If you don’t have anything to offer, I’m not giving him away, sister dearest. Get up, King, Uea. Let’s have lunch.”

I shout out to my best friends. King takes a break from his work and stands next to me. I look back and forth between him and Mai who’s standing on my other side.

When I stand between these two, I feel like falling into a hole. Do these assholes know that having the heights of the novel’s protagonists makes a normal real-life-height people like me have no place to stay in the society?!

Well, I mean, comparing my height to the standard Thai girls, being 5’8 is not short, but with two 6’ something standing next to me, I feel like I’m a midget. It’s like having King being tall is not enough, here comes Mai. Even Uea is taller than me.

Standard face, standard height; why is my life like this?

“What do you guys plan on eating?” King asks.

"I'll eat at sister Phorn's. What 'bout you?" I ask him.

"Wouldn't it be better if you just don't order anything? 'Cause you'll complain about weight again."

King doesn't answer my question but teases Uea instead. In return, he receives a death stare from Uea.

"Mind your own business."

There goes the simple phrase from Mr Anon, my dear friend.

King just scoffs as if he's happy he gets an insult, then he looks at Mai.

"What about you, kid? What do you wanna eat?"

"Anything is fine. Thank you."

He says politely in that deep voice – the gentleman type straight out of a novel – making King look like an asshole spilling all those teases. One point of satisfaction from me to Mai.

Well-behaved, good-looking, so fitting and deserving to be with Uea; my friend needs someone like this!

"Then let's fricking eat at sister Phorn's," King says and leads all of us into the elevator.

I follow him and stand in a corner so that Mai gets to stand next to Uea. Seeing their arms collided due to the narrow space in the elevator makes me smile.

Does it spark up between you two? Now say thank you to your brother Jade!

We walk away from the building to the canteen near the office. The office workers from different companies gather here as if they are hunting for a table to get lunch.

“What do you wanna eat? I’ll go order for you all,” I say when we are all seated. At first, I tried pushing Mai to sit next to Uea, but King stole the seat, so Mai has to sit next to me.

“Stir-fried basil with crispy pork – spicy, no green beans, and just a bit of basil. Tell sister Phorn to put some meat in the soup.”

King orders with so many details, doesn’t care about me who has to remember all that. I do want to kick him in the face. Go order that yourself you picky ass!

“Stir-fried sukiyaki with seafood,” Uea says before going on his phone.

“What do you want, Mai? My treat,” I say.

“Seafood fried rice, but you don’t have to buy it for me. That’s too kind.”

Woah, some sort of godly aura spreads from him again. Could’ve had me in tears. Since I started training interns, nobody ever rejected free food, he’s the first one.

Being considerate of the money in my wallet; what a good kid.

“Hey, what the hell? Just let Jade buy it for you. You’re in his care, he has to take care of you!” King shouts.

“Oh, if that’s the case, then okay,” Mai says thankfully.

Mother fucking King! I'm going to kill you!

I give a murderous look to my friend who speaks too much. He pretends to be innocent. But as soon as Mai putting his hands together to show his gratefulness, my heart goes all soft.

Fine, treating an intern for a day wouldn't kill me. I just won't get bubble tea after lunch.

I go to order at sister Phorn's and walk back to the table. As we wait for lunch, a conversation about the newcomer starts.

"How old are you, Mai?" I ask.

"I'm twenty-one," he replies with a polite smile as always. I raise my eyebrows, suddenly feel like I'm old.

Mai is six years younger than us. So young! When I was in the first year of the university, he was just a seventh-grade student!

Nowadays age is nothing but a number (as long as they're not underage, of course). Cougar dating is a new trend. Uea is still fit and fresh. They work!

"And you guys are...?"

"Twenty-seven," I reply.

"You guys look so young," Mai says. I couldn't tell if he's just trying to be polite or whatever, but I'll take that as a compliment.

"I remember one time a university student asked Uea which university we were studying in. Right, King?"

"Yep, he must be blind."

“Fuck you, King,” Uea says, not even looking away from his phone.

I hear King scoffs and shake my head tiredly, then I look at Mai who smiles back at me.

“Brother Uea really has a baby face. You too, brother Jade.”

Damn. He knows how to compliment. He’s getting close to me to make his way to Uea for sure!

“He doesn’t have just a baby face, he also has a baby brain. He’s stupid as hell. Don’t take him seriously.”

“King you motherfucker. I’ll sell your phone number to all your exes to the point you are all cornered up, unable to do anything.”

“I’ll just change my phone number. End of story.” He smirks back at me.

I pray again inside so that I don’t turn into Tony Ja and smack his handsome face. I decide to change the subject to distract myself.

“What about you? Do you have a girlfriend or a boyfriend?” I ask Mai directly. Before shipping him with my best friend, I must know Uea won’t be number two. I’m a bit surprised to see Mai laugh softly. His eyes light up as he replies.

“No, I’m not with anyone yet.”

“That’s a lie. Good-looking guy like you really don’t have anyone?” I ask in a high-pitched voice in disbelief, but he nods firmly.

"I don't really get along with people. No love interest. I also have just a couple of friends."

"Is that right? You definitely hide your light under a bushel," King interjects again.

"No, I don't really have a girlfriend or a boyfriend."

When the lunch is served, I take a plate of stir-fried pork belly and red curry paste with a sting bean from a waiter as I scowl at King.

"Don't judge other people from your own habits. Not everyone is a jerk like you."

"You ass."

He pushes my head with his hand so strongly that I almost had my face land into my own plate, luckily enough that Mai holds my shoulder back in time.

"Are you alright?" He looks at me worriedly.

I brush it off and kick King's leg as a revenge. I scoop some rice into my mouth before glancing at Uea's seafood suki-yaki and Mai's seafood fried rice.

Same taste, same seafood. Or did Mai order after my friend?

It doesn't take long until we all finish our lunch. I walk over to pay my bill and Mai's, then I look at the bubble tea booth near sister Phorn's shop sadly, feeling the emptiness inside my wallet.

I'm sorry, dear diabetes. We have to break up for a day.

We walk back to the office under the midday sun in

Thailand. It's so hot and could possibly cook an egg. Uea and King walk back to the department, while I plan to take a quick look around the office. Not that I want to show off my face, but since many customers want me to deliver their gifts to my best friends, I have to be a good person (?) by delivering those stuff for them.

Is Pong back from lunch yet? Should I go and get my gift of gratitude right now? Maybe I still have some time left to get the bubble tea.

"Brother Jade, aren't you coming back to your desk?"

The soft voice makes me turn around immediately. I see Mai behind me. He is looking at me, as I'm about to walk in another direction instead of going back to the IT office.

"I'll see some friends. You can go back to your desk and wait there," I say.

Mai nods and obeys easily. Being a senior is quite awesome. The younger one does everything you ask to. I feel more powerful somehow. Mr Jade right here loves this!

I take the gifts from same old people. I also drop by Pong to remind him of what I did for him. He gives me a 100-baht banknote. After that, I head back to my office with a smile and a cup of bubble tea I've just bought downstairs.

"Oh, someone gave King some gifts again. What a hot guy my husband is," Fai says once she sees me putting a box of cookies on King's desk.

King is busy playing a game. He looks at the box for just a short while.

“From who now?”

“ ‘Fahsai’ from marketing,” I say.

“Um. That one’s cute too.”

“You said everyone’s cute. When are you going to finally pick someone?” ‘Gun’, our younger programmer, asks while stroking his belly. “You get gifts every day. So is Uea. Our office is full of snacks. We can barely stuff more in.”

“You talk too much. Isn’t it good to get free food?” King, the cause of the problem, asks without leaving his eyes from the game he is playing.

“It’s great, of course, but we are getting fat.”

“Yeah, you all ate so much that you’re losing all your shapes, especially Jade, your friend,” Bas, the head of the department, says. That has me all nerve-wracking.

“I’m not getting fat! I still have some shapes left.”

“Brother Jade, you like desserts?” Mai asks me when I walk back to my desk. His eyes are full of curiosity.

This guy is taking in all the details, trying to impress me to get to Uea for sure. Fine, I’m going to be kind.

“Yeah, I like desserts or anything sweet. My favorite, though, is the original glazed donut from Krispy Kreme.”

I make sure I specifically say exactly what I want while feeling happy inside. You know what you should buy for me now,

so better hurry up, I don't like wasting time.

"Noted." He smiles at me.

I just nod back, trying not to look like a gluttony man by turning to my laptop and continuing my work.

The afternoon session goes well, Mai's already known

what he's doing, so I don't have to teach him much. I just give him some advice when he asks, switching this role with Uea.

On Uea's side, he's now more talkative to Mai than in the morning, and Mai seems less shy. Cannot deny that they look hella good together like the famous couples on Instagram or so.

I ask Uea to look at Mai's work, so I can focus more on my work which is due at 5 PM. Finally, the working hours are over.

"Going homeeeeeee."

I stretch happily in front of the computer; the clock on the screen shows it's 5:30 PM. I start packing up my stuff, ready to go back to my condo.

I'm lucky enough that my department has no one who likes to shout out when someone goes home on time, trying to point out we're not as hard-working as the other office. Of course, everyone here wants to go home after a long day. Who wants to work overtime when you haven't got a raise? It's better to hurry back to their wifey or hubby or whoever they are.

For a single man like me, I'll just go home to watch Netflix

and chill in my own lovely, lonely room. On occasions, if I have some energy left, I'll eat something nice at the mall. I might have some all-you-can-eat buffet if my budget allows me to. Sometimes Uea and King join me, but if they have someone to go home with, I'll go solo.

Lately they don't have anyone by their sides, and I also don't have any money in my wallet, so the all-you-can-eat buffet plan will be delayed for quite some time.

"Come on, Mai. Let's go home." I pat Mai on the shoulder.

He turns off his computer and says goodbye to everyone. I walk out of the office to wait for my two friends at the entrance, followed by Mai who is right behind me like a puppy.

"Where do you guys live?" Mai asks us on the way to the elevator.

"King's condo is near Si Lom. Uea's is near Sathorn. Mine is kind of far from here, Lat Krabang," I say. The truth is that the condo I live in used to be my elder brother's, 'Jet', and he let me take over it. That saves me some cost.

"So how do you come to work, brother Jade?"

"The ARL, then the BTS. I have to get up early every morning, it's crowded."

"My condo is also in Lat Krabang," Mai says with a wide smile. "I have a car. Since we live in the same area, I can give you a ride every day."

"Oh, no. No need. That's too kind."

My eyes go wide from how much he's putting in the work. Contrasting with his innocent looks, he quite knows his game. Hey, kid. You're trying to get through Uea by being close with his best friend since the first day?

"No, that's actually nothing. We're going the same way, right? I can take you home."

"But I think--"

"Just go with him, Jade. You always complain about the sky train ticket draining your pocket. Here it is, your way out," King says what's on my mind.

Surely, it will help me save up some money, but I have a common sense. I can't just be his parasite right away. He's not even worked officially yet.

"Please," he repeats before giving me a sincere smile like a puppy.

"Well then, could you give me a ride home for a day? Thank you so much."

I eventually lost to his effort. This is considered normal to me. If someone wants to get to my friend, they'll treat me like an angel first, and soon enough they will bug me to help hook them up with my friends. I've seen a lot of those people, but none of them ever gave me a ride.

"See you tomorrow."

Uea says and walks to his car. The same goes for King. I wave goodbye to my friends and turn to the intern in my care

who points at his car in the parking lot.

“My car is over there.”

He leads me to his car while I watch his wide shoulder, thinking that this guy is investing quite a lot on me. He seems to like Uea a lot.

You’re doing good with the right person, young man. Brother Jade will hook you right up to Uea!

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