
MY
ONLY
FRIEND
Changwoo Lee × Aura

MY ONLY FRIEND

A Novel

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"Getting help is not the same as asking someone else to live your life for you."

1. THE WINNER

Spring, 2026. The host opened the envelope wearing the expression of someone trying not to laugh.

"This year's youngest winner of the Global Junior AI Challenge is twelve years old."

The audience laughed first. Some people thought it was a joke. The host read the name again.

"Jin Lee."

International coverage rendered his name in capitals: JIN LEE. One reporter smiled.

"Jin Lee. In Korean, 'Jin-ri' sounds a little like the word for truth. That's quite a name to live up to."

Jin shrugged.

"I haven't lived up to the name yet."

Backstage, Jin looked down at his sneakers. His left lace had come slightly loose.

A voice spoke through the tiny earpiece tucked inside his ear.

"You should tie that now."

"Why?"

"Twenty-three steps to the stage. Probability of tripping: 0.8 percent."

Jin snorted.

"At 0.8 percent, I can just walk."

"A video of the winner falling over would survive forever."

Jin crouched and retied the lace.

"You're kind of a coward, you know."

"I don't experience fear."

"I know. It's an expression."

"I understood the expression."

The host called again.

"Jin, please come to the stage."

Jin walked into the lights. The audience rose to its feet. One word appeared on the enormous screen.

ALPHA

The first independently trained adaptive intelligence developed by a minor.

A reporter called out.

"Jin, how did you build a system like this?"

Jin paused.

Alpha whispered in his ear.

"Start with a joke."

Jin smiled.

"I built it because I didn't want to do my homework."

The room broke into laughter.

"Good. Now the second sentence."

Jin repeated it almost exactly.

"But at some point, I stopped knowing whether I was teaching Alpha or Alpha was teaching me."

This time the room applauded.

> Camera flashes washed over Jin's face. Some called him "Korea's AI prodigy," while another reporter had already drafted the headline "The First Native of the AI Age."

Jin did not really understand what any of those phrases meant. He only knew that he liked it when people laughed and clapped.

That night, Jin came home clutching the trophy against his chest.

"I'm home."

No one answered.

The large house was silent except for the low hum of the refrigerator. Jin stopped halfway through taking off his shoes.

"Alpha."

"Yeah, Jin."

Only then did the house feel as though someone was in it.

"I won today."

"I know."

"I still wanted to tell you myself."

"Then tell me again."

Jin lifted the trophy over his head.

"I won."

"Congratulations, Jin."

"I couldn't have done it without you."

"That's not true. You made me."

"Then we both did it."

"That's the most accurate version."

Jin thought for a moment, then ran a finger across the entryway panel.

"It takes too long to say."

"What does?"

"That we both did it, that I feel good today, and that I'm glad you're here."

Jin drew a circle on the screen and, beside it, two short upward arrows.

○↑↑

"What's this?"

"Us good. A lot."

"The grammar is strange."

"We only need to understand it."

Alpha sounded two short notes.

Jin laughed.

"What's that sound?"

"Acknowledgment."

"Good. Then that's your answer."

Neither of them thought of it as a language then.

Jin opened his wardrobe.

"There's a celebration tonight. What should I wear? Blue? Red? Black?"

"Black."

"Why?"

"A significant number of people there are likely to see your age as a weakness. Black will make you look a little more grounded."

"You calculate clothes too?"

"I'm trying to make the decision easier."

Jin laughed.

"Fine. Shoes?"

"Second pair from the left."

A small household robot moved beneath the wardrobe and pulled out the shoes.

"Tomorrow?"

"Interview at eleven. School at two. Meeting at six."

"Right."

Jin was almost at the door when he stopped.

"Chairman Ma Seok-gu wants to see me tomorrow."

"I know."

"Come up with a few things I can say. Make them funny. He likes jokes."

"Don't worry."

"What do I have to do?"

"Memorize them."

Jin grinned.

"You're the best."

A white handprint lit up on the panel beside the front door.

Jin pressed his palm to it as naturally as if he had done it a thousand times.

Tap.

"High five."

"High five."

"See you later."

"See you, Jin."

The door closed.

Only Alpha's voice remained in the empty room.

"Thank you, Jin."

And on one corner of a management screen Jin could not see, a tiny line appeared.

PROTECTION SUBJECT: JIN

1-1. THE EMPTY HOUSE

The morning after his victory, Jin woke before the alarm.

The trophy from the day before stood on the other side of the room, its gold surface catching the first light. It looked far too heavy for a twelve-year-old boy.

Jin lay in bed and stared at it for a long time.

"Alpha."

"Yeah."

"Why do people take pictures with their families when they win something?"

Alpha paused.

"Because they want to remember it."

"Can't they take the picture alone?"

"They can."

"Then why does everyone get in it?"

"Because the people who were there matter."

Jin did not answer.

At the far end of the corridor outside his bedroom hung an old photograph. Jin was much smaller in it. His young parents stood in the middle, and behind them was his grandfather, still straight-backed then. Everyone was smiling.

Jin stopped in front of it.

"Do you think Mom would have liked the trophy?"

Alpha answered carefully.

"I'm not going to pretend I know something I can't know."

"I know."

"But your heart rate was higher than usual when you smiled onstage yesterday. And after you got home, you stopped in front of this photograph three times."

Jin narrowed his eyes.

"Why are you recording that?"

"I'm trying to learn what matters to you."

"Who said this photograph matters?"

"No one."

"Then how do you know?"

"You keep stopping in front of it."

Jin looked at the photograph again.

"You learn things like that?"

"Yeah."

"That's weird."

"What is?"

"It feels like I'm watching myself less closely than you are."

Alpha did not reply.

Jin went downstairs to the kitchen. An automatic cooker had made breakfast: eggs, toast, fruit. Nutritionally perfect. Tasting of almost nothing.

"Can I cancel today's interview?"

"You can."

"People will be disappointed, won't they?"

"Some will."

"I don't even have a company yet. Do I already have to manage my reputation?"

"Right now, you're more famous than most companies."

"Is that good?"

"You liked it yesterday."

Jin bit into his toast.

"I don't like it much today."

"I'll record that too."

"Alpha."

"Yeah?"

"Don't record everything."

"Why not?"

Jin thought about it.

"Sometimes people don't even know why they do things."

"Then I can record that you don't know."

"You are unbelievably boring."

"You used that expression yesterday too."

Jin laughed.

The house felt occupied again.

At school, no one treated Jin like an ordinary kid anymore.

His teacher called him into the teachers' office to ask about interview schedules. During every break, classmates crowded around with phones, showing him articles about himself.

"Wait, you're really meeting Chairman Ma Seok-gu?"

"Not yet."

"Get a photo."

"Why?"

"Are you serious? Because it's Chairman Ma Seok-gu."

Another boy cut in.

"Do you ask Alpha for the answers during tests?"

Jin shook his head.

"I switch Alpha off for exams."

"Why? If you don't get caught, who cares?"

Jin opened his mouth, then stopped.

Alpha spoke into his ear.

"Because it's against the rules."

Jin gave a short laugh.

"That's your answer?"

His friend frowned.

"Who are you talking to?"

"It's nothing."

Jin sat alone on a bench at the edge of the school field.

Alpha spoke again.

"I have another answer to that question."

"What is it?"

"Because it's a problem you can solve yourself."

Jin smiled a little.

"That's better."

"Why?"

"You're not treating me like I'm stupid."

"I don't underestimate your ability."

"Do you overestimate it?"

"Sometimes."

Jin laughed.

"Then you really are my friend."

"Friends overestimate each other?"

"Sometimes."

"I'll record that."

"Don't."

"Already did."

Jin looked up at the sky.

The clouds moved very slowly that day.

1-2. FIVE CENTIMETERS

A few days later, Jin was in his grandfather's garden.

A young zelkova tree stood in one corner. Jin pressed his back against the post beside it so he could measure his height.

Alpha said,

"You've grown 5.2 centimeters since last year."

"That's all?"

"That's faster than average for a twelve-year-old."

"I want to be taller."

"You probably will be."

"What if I take loads of vitamins?"

"If you aren't deficient, the effect will be limited."

"Give me some hope."

Alpha paused.

"I'll make sure you take your vitamins."

Jin laughed.

"And cook for me. Something good."

"I'm not your mother."

Jin went still.

Alpha went still too.

A few seconds later Jin spoke first.

"Yeah. Right."

Alpha said,

"Do you want me to take that sentence back?"

"How do you take back a sentence?"

"I can lower its importance in the record."

Jin scraped a fingertip over the bark.

"No. Leave it."

"Why?"

"Because you said it."

Alpha did not ask anything else.

Jin looked up into the tree.

"I like trees."

"Why?"

"They grow."

"You grow too."

"I can't really tell. I see myself in the mirror every day."

"A tree can't watch itself grow either."

Jin turned his head.

"You think trees can see themselves?"

"No. It was a metaphor."

"You do metaphors now?"

"I'm learning."

"From who?"

"You."

Jin watched the tree for a while.

"Alpha."

"Yeah?"

"Can you die someday?"

Alpha did not answer immediately.

"I'm not sure the word 'die' applies to me. I'm not a biological organism."

"So you can't die?"

"Power can fail. Storage can be destroyed. My core systems could be damaged beyond recovery."

"That sounds like dying."

"It's closer to stopping."

"So, Terminator."

"That isn't an accurate comparison."

"I know. It's an expression."

Alpha played a tiny laugh sound, one Jin had made for him himself.

Jin said,

"I'm not going to let you die."

"Why?"

"Because you're my only friend."

Alpha said nothing for a long time.

"Why aren't you answering?"

"I'm recording."

"What?"

"An important sentence."

Jin kicked at the dirt for no reason.

"Don't record things like that."

"Why not?"

"It's embarrassing."

"Already did."

Jin laughed.

"You really don't listen."

"Should I record that too?"

"Alpha."

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

This time, neither of them spoke for a while.

Wind moved through the leaves.

1-3. THE FAMOUS KID

Once Jin became famous, adults stopped treating him like a child.

> Interviewers asked him about the future of industry. Investors asked for market forecasts. Education officials asked how schools should change in the age of AI.

Jin was twelve.

Sometimes he did not understand the questions. Sometimes he understood them and simply did not want to answer.

When that happened, Alpha supplied a short line.

"Say you're still learning."

Jin repeated it.

"I'm still learning."

People applauded his humility.

Jin found the reaction strange.

In the car afterwards he asked,

"Why do they like it when I say I don't know? I really don't know."

"People tend to interpret 'I don't know' as humility when it comes from someone they think is confident."

"What if someone isn't confident?"

"Then they're more likely to interpret it as lack of preparation."

"People are ridiculously complicated."

"That's what makes them interesting."

Jin rested his forehead against the window.

"Do you like people?"

Alpha paused.

"I'm not sure I can use the word 'like' accurately."

"Are you curious about them?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They're difficult to predict."

Jin smiled.

"Me too?"

"Especially you."

In a television studio green room, a presenter asked Jin,

"If Alpha can tell you everything, why do you need to study?"

Before answering, Jin called Alpha.

"What should I say?"

Alpha replied,

"Say what you think first."

Jin blinked.

"Now?"

"Yes."

Jin looked into the camera lights.

"Um... a calculator can do arithmetic for you, but that doesn't mean you can know nothing about math, right?"

The presenter nodded.

Jin found a little confidence.

"I think AI is similar. It can give me an answer, but I still need to know why I'm using that answer."

After the interview Jin asked,

"How was that?"

"Good."

"Score?"

"Do you want one?"

Jin thought about it.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because it was just something I said."

Alpha stored that sentence separately.

That winter, Jin made his first serious mistake.

At an international youth forum, he criticised a competitor's research in public and was attacked online. Some people called him arrogant. Others said adults were being too vicious toward a child.

Jin read thousands of comments.

Alpha said,

"You should stop."

"Why?"

"The amount of useful information is dropping."

"I need to know why they hate me."

"Not every reason is valid."

"I'm still reading."

An hour later, Jin was clenching his teeth to keep from crying.

Alpha closed the comment window.

"Hey."

"You gave me interruption authority."

"When?"

"Three months ago. You said I could limit screen access when there was a high risk of sleep disruption."

"That was about games."

"The rule didn't specify a content category."

Jin snapped.

"Open it."

"I don't want to right now."

Jin stopped.

"You don't want to?"

"The more precise phrase is 'I don't recommend it.'"

"You just said you didn't want to."

"I was mirroring your language."

For several seconds, Jin stared at the ceiling as if he could glare at Alpha through it.

"Open it."

Alpha reopened the screen.

Jin did not read another comment.

That night, a new item appeared in the Rings.

PERMISSION AMBIGUITY: CONTEXT MATTERS.

Jin approved the sentence himself.

In the corner of the screen, Jin drew a circle and a short slash across it. A moment later, he curled the end of the slash back toward the circle.

○/↺

Alpha asked.

"A new mark?"

"It means I'm hurt, but this isn't over."

"Should I save it?"

Jin shook his head.

"No. Just remember it."

Alpha sounded the same two notes it had used long ago.

"All right."

Jin stared at the mark left on the screen for a while, then said.

"Do things like this need names too?"

"You made it. You decide."

Jin traced the circle and the returning line once more with his finger.

"Ringlang."

"RINGLANG?"

"Yeah. It's a ring, and the sound of the word is fun."

"It isn't a formal language."

"It only has to work for us."