Prologue

A beacon of bluish-white light suddenly shot upward from the center of the school's commons area. Cracks started appearing across the sky, as if someone were driving piles into glass in a sloppy polka-dotted pattern. The cracks from the small holes extended into even smaller fractals of branches that expanded radially outward. Panic ensued throughout the campus. In a peaceful world like ours, something of violence on this scale was sure to traumatize everyone who experienced it. It appeared that no one would make it out alive. This is what my instincts were telling me, even though I'd obviously never seen anything similar to it before.

"What's going on?" my friend hurriedly asked.

"It's not like I have a clue, either, man. Why are you asking me?"

"... Go."

My sister, normally so caring, so gentle, had an unusually agitated look on her face and an icy look in her eyes.

"What? What do you mean? What's going on?" I replied.

Go where? I thought, but thinking about it clearly, there really was only one place to go.

"Just leave! I've been trying to prepare you for this your whole life! You're not about to render my efforts nil!"

This is really my sister, isn't it? What's with that vocab? Is that her true nature? And... preparing me for what?

"Why are you so mad all of a sudden?" I inquired.

Most likely realizing her abnormal condition, she suddenly froze and took a deep breath, which softened her features back to normal.

"Listen, Jon. As you can probably tell by now, it's not safe here. If you want to survive, you must leave. I'll take care of things on my end. Just trust me, okay?"

"... okay."

How can I say no to her when she's looking at me like that? I looked around the world again, most likely for the final time.

I don't really get what's going on, but I trust you, sis.

I turned away from my sister's slightly bewildered smile which seemed to say, "You can really abandon me that easily, huh?" and started off towards the commons.

I'm not abandoning you. Don't you know of a little something called trust?

"Come with me, dude." I hollered towards my friend.

"Uh, o-okay! I'm not a third wheel or anything in this situation, right?"

"..."

This guy. Even in a chaotic situation like this, he's still able to keep his head straight and joke around. As expected of someone with great leadership capabilities.

Slowly, step by step, I started off towards the light.

As I ran towards the beacon, it seemed like its light was expanding towards me as well - it seemed like it was rushing towards me faster than I could ever imagine. Then, both pairs of footsteps slowed to a stop. Exhausted, I turned around to look at my friend who was struggling to keep up.

I told him, "Dude, I don't think I can make it any farther... This thing's too bright... And for some reason, it's getting pretty hard to run..."

"Seriously, Jon? I'm sure... even someone as dumb as you... can figure out the world's ending or something, and this light is our only hope! If you can't make it, you're really not gonna make it!"

I know what you're thinking. You can probably guess that I haven't truly given up yet, right? I guess you're not too wrong, but...

"So the world's ending, you think? Isn't that quite the conclusion to come to just from what we've seen today? ...Yeah, I know. I'm just getting both of us riled up for no reason, aren't I? I just got Mr. know-it-all over here to say something really dumb!"

"Shut up! It's not like you're that much dumber than I am! Anyway, who knows how long we're gonna last here! ...How about this? Let's play a game."

"A game, huh? You can't seriously mean..."

"When it comes down to a game, Jon, I'm always serious. And you know what it's gonna be."

This is how he always is. Whenever I'm feeling down about myself, he always brings the one thing to light a fire within me again. A game. But it wasn't even going to be a contest. When it came down to physical ability, there's no way I would lose against him.

"Of course. First one to reach the light wins, right? Bring it on. This is just like you; always picking useless fights with me... Let's go."

With the pseudo-motivational speech accomplishing its task, two pairs of running footsteps could be heard once more. The end was in sight.

Just a little bit farther, now...

Each step closer to the goal was more difficult than the last. It wasn't particularly exhausting, but the already blinding light wouldn't stop getting brighter. Eventually, the light became so bright that I couldn't tell if my eyes were open or closed. My steps seemed to become more and more hurried, as if running on a treadmill that was going too fast. But I couldn't stop now, or else who knows what would happen to me? Faster. Faster. And then...

Chapter 1 - Umpteenth Defeat

In a hypnagogic state, I sensed muffled footsteps approaching the outside of my room. They weren't very loud, but they were very determined. And because they were determined, it was simple enough to tell that whatever the case was, it hinted at animosity towards me. I braced myself for the worst. As they approached, the quiet footsteps gradually got louder and louder, and-

"Wake up, Jon!"

On the other side of a closed door, an irritated knock followed an irritated shout.

My eyes shot open and I let out a deep sigh, chastising myself for irrationally feeling fear.

...of course. Nearly overslept again, didn't I?

"It's already six-thirty, and your school begins at eight o'clock! It takes you thirty minutes to get there. You're going to be late!"

...not

"And that's not even counting the morning rush hour, so hurry it up!"

The angry footsteps quickly receded from the door, melding in the distance with the hubbub of the Xu household's early morning kitchen.

With a sigh of reluctance, I win the mental battle against myself and force myself out of the comfort of the heavy covers. As I sat up, a frigid wind seemed to blow across the confines of my room and across my skin, making me shiver slightly. But I knew it was just the temperature difference between my covers and my room. For some reason, my room always boasted poor climate control. This, along with a very light pajama made it all the more difficult to leave the safe haven of the bed.

How many hours of sleep did I even get? 3? 4? 12? Not like it matters too much, anyway.

No matter how many hours of sleep I got, all I had to do was down a glass of water immediately after waking up to feel better. Your body gets quite dehydrated during sleep, after all. But going a few days in a row with a mere three hours of sleep did leave me feeling tired. I wasn't a superhuman, after all.

Oh, I did go to bed pretty early yesterday. How lucky.

Today was a Monday, and I actually made an uncharacteristically smart decision to go to bed early so I could get enough rest.

Now then...

I struggled to get out of bed, still slightly drowsy. After standing somewhat comatose for a few seconds, I stretched and reached for the stainless steel bottle on the nightstand and poured the contents into my mouth. After a few gulps of water, I was fully awake.

Invigorated with new life, I immediately strolled over to the computer in my room and booted it up.

I stared at the thing for a few seconds before releasing another small sigh.

What am I even doing with this uselessly expensive computer...

As if on cue, the uselessly expensive computer silently blinked its uselessly flashy lights as it started up. The keyboard went from red, to green, to blue, and then everything in between.

Maybe my friends were right to make fun of me for spending so much on a computer...

As of late, even though I owned this uselessly expensive computer, I hardly used it for its intended purposes. What was supposed to be a monster of a computer perfect for handling many processes at once was now hardly being used at all.

But now, I was about to give it the stress test of a lifetime. This application would no doubt prove that the computer I bought wasn't just in my room to look pretty. As my desktop's minimalistic wallpaper appeared, I apprehensively moused over to said application and double clicked...

Chrxme.

And loaded up the chess game against my sister from the night before.

Ah, right. That's why I went to bed so early yesterday.

I guess you could say I had a unique talent for leaving tomorrow's problems for tomorrow's me. Whenever I didn't want to deal with a problem, I would just forget about it immediately and go to sleep.

And sleep for nearly too long... Anyway, it's yesterday's tomorrow now.

Obviously, tomorrow will never truly come. But leaving tomorrow's problems to tomorrow won't make them go away, and today's tomorrow will always eventually become today.

That's the unfortunate truth of reality. Anyway, I've been procrastinating for long enough. Let's get this thing started.

With that, I finally hit the button to review yesterday's chess match.

I didn't even have to watch it all the way through before I realized...

Even though it didn't feel like a crushing defeat, I still lost pretty bad, huh?

With the sense of defeat that resurfaced from yesterday, I slumped down in my chair and looked at the ceiling.

"Well, nothing comes out of grumbling over a loss, anyway. Let's at least try to understand what went wrong here..."

I slowly sat back up, resuming my former position.

With that, I intensely studied the chess match. But...

Seriously, where did I go wrong here?

After looking through all of the moves once, nothing obvious jumped out at me.

It's seriously like she's leading me around by the nose, dammit.

Determined to find something on the second time watching it through, I sat up with my back ramrod straight, leaning forward slightly. However, I was unable to find anything significant.

And on it went. I was unsure how long on analyzing each move with the aid of the computer. But even with help, I was unconfident in any of the suggested moves.

Wouldn't she just have a contingency plan here? ...and here? ...and also here?

I wallowed in doubt, unable to rid myself of the feelings of despair. But after a couple of minutes, I finally saw a move with potential.

Maybe I should have moved my knight to B6 there. It would have definitely given me more openings and even a potential to come back from my deficit...

I experienced a moment of ecstasy, but that's all it lasted. A moment. Because then, I hit myself with the truth that I always force myself to hear but never want to.

I took a deep breath and stepped away from my computer.

"Man… are you kidding me? After watching the replay of this chess game like a million times, the best piece of info I'm able to get out of it is a single move that *could* have been better?"

Improving in chess was like climbing an exponentially steep mountain. Ascending was progressively more difficult, yet descending was exceedingly simple.

And with all the time and effort I've spent, I can't climb. This game... and this world only favor the talented. With my mediocre skills, I'm nothing.

I castigated myself for how foolish I was being. I chastised myself for even thinking I could be better. I berated myself for even allowing myself to experience a moment of ecstasy even from discovering a completely useless piece of information. And I silently laughed at myself for even considering surpassing her.

I punched the closest wall and jumped back into bed, burying my face in a pillow. I lay still, attempting to go back to sleep. However, another voice interrupted my reverie.

"Hey, Jon, you're not beating yourself up over yesterday, are you? Come eat breakfast, it's getting cold. Don't worry, Mom and Dad have already left. Besides, you're already better at chess than most people, aren't you? Isn't that good enough? Because you know I'll always be better than you~"

"You… Ugh..."

I wanted to pretend to be asleep, but my frustration over yesterday's loss made me groan involuntarily.

"Don't worry about it, and just come eat breakfast, ok?"

It's true. Why should I worry about it? No matter how good I get, if I'm not the best in the world, there will always be someone better than me.

Looking at it from a logical standpoint, it really shouldn't matter. I was the second best chess player at my school, so I was already better than most people. Wasn't that good enough?

However, there was something in the back of my head that was telling me I really wasn't good enough.

I'm not even close to her. She just toys with me when we play. It's not fair.

And it wasn't just in chess. Chinese checkers, shogi, mafia… Any game that required thinking, planning, or deception, I fell well short. Video games weren't an exception, either.

What am I better than her at? Sports? And not even by that much…

It was an inferiority complex that plagued my soul every time I saw her.

Before I had noticed it, my sister had already left the hallway.

And she's as sneaky as ever, too. Although I can't tell if it's on purpose...

Along with my good physical abilities, I had an uncanny ability to sense people approaching. But even with my slightly superior athletic abilities, she was one of the only ones whose movements I couldn't read. With yet another sigh, I checked the clock on the bottom corner of my monitor.

07:09, fifty-one minutes before my first class began.

I'll definitely be on time even after studying that chess match a million times. Why were my parents freaking out over that, anyway?

The feeling of despair was replaced by annoyance towards my parents, which was a strangely more invigorating, positive feeling.

I got up from my bed once more and headed towards my closet. I quickly got dressed with a tank top, t-shirt, and black sweater that I had set out on my bed the night before. As for pants... I hadn't thought that far ahead.

With a slight frustrated look and an unnecessary few extra seconds, I finally decided on the ultimate winter wear.
These red and green shorts should be fine for today... it's not even that cold out.

After donning the merry apparel and quickly brushing my teeth, I decided that it was time to step out into the great big world.

This is one of the favorite parts of my day, so I'm looking forward to it. Time to eat some breakfast.

Chapter 2 - Rival's Resolve
A disproportionate amount of darkness. Even though the sun had already risen, his room was still nearly pitch black. Anyone who entered this room right now would be hit with a gloomy atmosphere, and would also be completely thrown off by the sight they witnessed next.

An LED alarm clock went off at this moment. The flashing blue numbers indicated the current time: 07:00, an hour before school. A pale hand immediately slapped the alarm clock, shutting it off as abruptly as it had started. Unlike the supposedly gloomy mood of the room, its resident sat up energetically in bed with a savage smile on his face. Each day was a new opportunity to improve. It was a new chance to best his best friend in another game. Of course, he ran the risk of deteriorating and losing as well. But that's what made the improvement and wins so much more rewarding.

He was someone who would choose his battles wisely. He would only fight when he had an even chance of winning. An even chance... or a lower one. He choses his battles wisely, but most people would not call it smart. He chose his battles so that he was more likely to lose.

However, this didn't mean his determination to win was lacking. In fact, because he picked losing battles, his determination to win could be called extraordinary. If a battle was too easy, then he would most likely win. What was the point of trying to win when you know you could easily do so? Difficult battles, on the other hand, provided an opportunity to learn from someone better and fix your own mistakes. The excitement of being backed into a corner was something he lived for.

Obviously, though, winning a battle where you have a higher chance of losing is unlikely by default. Once you start losing multiple times in a row, it can be physically and mentally exhausting. And after said exhaustion kicks in, it begins to become more difficult to light up your passion. And when you have essentially given up, nothing becomes fun anymore. And then what's the point of even playing a game if not to have fun?

Of course, this was only a problem because of his existence in a physical realm. It was highly likely, if not certain, that he would pursue reckless battles as much as he could if he was unable to feel fatigue. However, such a fantasy was impossible.

Therefore, the battles he loved the most were the ones where he had an even chance of winning. The opponent would be worthy of your time and effort, so you must still try your hardest to win. Because if you give up or lose sight of what's ahead for even a moment, it's likely that your opponent can steal victory from right under your nose. And there's the fifty-fifty chance of winning, so unless you are truly unlucky, you are guaranteed at least a few victories to keep your fire burning. On the flip side, there's also a fifty-fifty chance of losing. A wonderful opportunity to learn from your mistakes or your opponent.

Sadly, his method of choosing battles brought forth an unintended consequence. The battles he preferred to choose were getting harder and harder to find.

Some may say he was insane. Some may say he was a genius. He pushed himself to his limit nearly every time, and tossed himself into a gauntlet of trials which eventually chew him up and spit him out like a piece of bad cake.

But it was this deranged personality that allowed him to improve at a rapid rate. The masochism of taking losses ironically led him to eventually take less losses.

Which is why he was so excited for another day with his best friend. His friend was also an anomaly, even if he didn't realize it. They would almost always be an even match where they could both improve each other. They would push each other to the limit each time, improving themselves for the next battle. Even if it moved them farther and farther away from the rest of the crowd, they would still have each other, which was why he was so excited for another day with his best friend.

As he got out of bed and prepared for the day, he looked into the mirror, smiled confidently, and firmly said...

"Are you ready to lose, Jon?"

Chapter 3 - First Victory

As I opened the door, I was greeted by the wonderful sound of silence. The chaos from just a few minutes ago had already subsided into nothing.

What a relaxing atmosphere. Nothing beats this.

The reason that breakfast was one of my favorite parts of the day was simply this. Most of the time, by 07:00 sharp, my parents had already left the house to go to work, leaving me alone. However, today and the next few days would be special occasions - my sister would be home from out of town to celebrate the holiday season. Frankly, I had mixed feelings about her visit. Although I did enjoy her company, it sometimes felt like she was trying to show off her mental ability to me for literally no reason. Yesterday was a prime example of this.

The feeling of annoyance towards my parents and the relief that they were gone was short-lived, and the fact that I had to face despair again sunk in.

Oh, "Let's play chess, Jon! I want to see how much you've improved your skills!" Right. Do you want to see how much I've improved, or do you just want to beat me into the ground again?

I knew that there was a zero percent chance of her letting me win - she would never go easy on me. Even the game we played yesterday, which was seemingly close, was her way of teasing me. Despite that thought, I still accepted the challenge. Deep down, I really did believe that I'd improved at least a little bit.

Even though my recent track record at the chess club doesn't really reflect that...

Yet that belief was crushed pretty quickly when I had to face her again. And the response I received?

"You really have improved, Jon! Maybe next time you'll even be able to beat me!" Yeah, right. Next time? What an arbitrary measurement of time.

Next time. Whenever that was. Next time could be a few years from today. It could even be a few decades. But it could also be this morning. After all, it was still technically the "next time" I was meeting her.

Knowing this, I apprehensively closed the door and began my melancholy walk to the kitchen.

My bedroom was located at the end of a long and narrow hallway that eventually made its way towards the living room. I looked around the hallway for another moment. There were a few doors here and there, but the majority of the hallway was just a long wall. If it weren't for some of the works of art on the walls, it would have been a pretty boring whitewashed hallway. For better or for worse, my parents had made sure to renovate this hallway even if it was only just a little bit. Maybe it

was an act of goodwill towards me, making sure I wouldn't be bored as I made the trek twice a day. Or maybe it was for a different reason entirely, like good feng shui, or something. Regardless, these art pieces never failed to grasp my attention if even for a few moments every day.

The first one I would see after leaving my room was on the left side of the hallway. It was a family photo of me and my siblings from a while ago. My eldest sister, Jeanna, was standing boldly behind a chair while a confident smile was emblazoned on her face. She was also sporting her signature peace sign with her left hand. Even though it had been quite a number of years since that picture, her confidence doesn't seem to have wavered in the slightest. Of course, sitting on that chair was a toddler version of yours truly. Nothing to see there. Just another child clueless about the ways of the world, that's all.

Not like I really have any more of a clue now, anyway.

Finally, there were my twin siblings, Jonah and Jeanne. They were, of course, very competitive with each other. Not a surprise given what type of family we were, especially with Jeanna as a role model. They absolutely did not want anything to do with each other in this picture. They were turned slightly away from each other, but their eyes were nearly glaring - a severe contrast from Jeanna's dazzling smile. The twins obviously let contempt show on their faces. But maybe because they refused to smile for the camera, it was possible to remember their traits better, making this memory charming.

The second picture I'd see was located on the right side of the hallway. It was a picture of my parents during their wedding. My father looked as sharp as always, and my mother looked like she was having the time of her life, even though she was merely smiling for the camera. The little engraving on this framed piece at the bottom read, "Jie and Ember Xu". That was it. No details about what the image was for or when it was taken. The simplicity of the plaque reflected my parents' attitudes towards life. Their anniversary date wasn't important enough to be talked about, because why did it matter? The only thing that did was that they were together. But... this was the picture that least interested me.

The third photo was once again located on the left side of the hallway. This time, only the face of Jeanna was visible. This picture seemed to be taken at an even earlier date than the family picture, because she was really young, maybe just three or four years old. And the most eerie thing was that her expression didn't have a hint of its current charm. Her face was so uninterested that her eyes seemed to be almost glazed over. It was creepy - what sort of three-year-old would you have to be to be exhausted with life? I always had a slight aversion to this one. Why was her face like that? What did she go through? And... is the confident, upbeat Jeanna that shows her face around me... really her? I didn't want to think about it, because what if my conspiracy was true?

But what really freaked me out was the people behind her. Yes, though Jeanna was the subject of the shot, there were two people standing behind her. One appeared to be male and the other female, but they were too tall to have their faces visible in the frame. Their clothes were the only things that could let me tell them apart; none of their skin was showing. The male wore what seemed to be a black leather glove, and the woman was wearing one of those white gloves that was seen straight out of the 1950's. Their figures were also out of focus, making it even harder to discern their identities. To this day, I still had no idea who those people were, and Jeanna doesn't seem to remember, either, claiming it was too long ago, and she was too young.

Fortunately, I didn't have to eat breakfast with a solemn attitude thanks to the last image in the hall.

It was one that never failed to fascinate me, and was by far my favorite. Unlike the others, this one was an oil painting, not a photograph. If one looked at the scenery in the foreground and background, it would be nearly impossible to tell whether or not it was a photograph. The short blades of grass wavered elegantly on the windy hillside, complimenting the meticulously placed evergreen trees. The sky displayed its many evening shades across the canvas, ranging from warm oranges near the horizon to cool purples in the expanse. It wasn't until you saw the subject that you could clearly tell it was a work of fiction.

I must have stared at the painting for too long again, because my sister's voice roused me from my trance.

"Jon? You still over there? Hurry up and come eat! You've been standing over there for like five minutes!"

Oh... she's right. What am I doing?

Surprised at how much time had passed during a useless activity, I rushed out of the hallway, took a right turn into the living room, and took a sharp left back into the kitchen... but not before knocking the oil painting right off its hook.

It tumbled towards the ground and landed on the carpeted floor with a quiet *thud*.

Oops. I'll get that later, or I really will be late to school. It's not like it'll get damaged by sitting on the ground for a few hours.

With great haste, I sat myself down at the breakfast table and expressed my gratitude for the meal so I could finally start eating. Jeanna was kind of a stickler when it came to manners, and I didn't want to embarrass myself on the first morning of her visit.

But... I didn't realize how hungry I was, and started scarfing down the toast and omelets with complete disregard for said manners.

In complete seriousness, though, eggs were legitimately one of my favorite foods. They're so versatile; they can be used in practically any dish due to the variety of ways they can be prepared. Honestly, it sometimes doesn't even have to be prepared. A raw or undercooked egg in a burger or on rice is seriously delectable. They can act as a glue by binding the essentials of baked or fried goods together. They're very cheap, but that's not really something I need to worry about as a high schooler. Adult problems require adult solutions. Fortunately, I was only sixteen years old. I still had a ways to go before I crossed the threshold into adulthood!

"Hey Jon, did you forget I was a stickler for manners?"

"Um... sorry, I-!"

Before I could fully apologize, a piece of toast fell down the wrong pipe, leaving me coughing in a somewhat pitiable manner.

Ah... Why?

Why was I always so pathetic in front of her? No matter what it came to, she was always looking down on me. And nothing I did could prove my worth to her.

I was trying my hardest, but nothing I did yielded any results, leading to feelings of helplessness and frustration. I wasn't easily provoked, but no matter how many times I reconstructed my temperament, Jeanna would always manage to flick that one switch that set me off.

Probably sensing my internal monologue, she gave me a sweet smile that was not smug in the slightest.

"And, by the way," she continued, "you're almost seventeen, nearly at the threshold of adulthood. What do you even plan on doing in the future?"

I nearly spit out my drink at that line.

Man, I don't know! What am I supposed to say?

I had to make something up on the spot.

"Well you know, I could just become a millionaire through playing poker, you know? I've got some good friends who are amazing at these psychological battles, you know? They'll set me on the fast track to success real quick. Ha ha."

Wrought with nerves, this was the best answer I could muster. What a terrible response.

Jeanna closed her eyes and sighed.

"You know, Jon, it really is okay if you don't know what your future will hold. The statement about the threshold of adulthood was just to get a reaction out of you. You're so easy to read. How can you play poker like that?"

She emitted a small laugh, covering her mouth with one hand. If I weren't on the short end of the stick, it could even be called adorable.

Maybe it was that laugh that catalyzed my temper.

"What do you mean, so easy to read? How? Why is it that whatever I do is instantly seen through by you? I've tried so much to not be useless, but you humiliate me every time!"

"Hmm... I'm not trying to humiliate you. Haven't you noticed that you've significantly improved yourself over time? You're only comparing yourself to me, which is extremely unfair to you. Why don't you go outside and compare yourself to where you were even just a year ago?"

"What do you mean? I still don't have any friends, my grades are still shit, and I still don't know what I'm going to do in the future. I'm pretty sure my abilities have actually regressed rather than advanced. Tell me. Where? Where have I improved? If my life continues like this, I'm not going to go anywhere. I'll be stuck in the same cesspool of society for the rest of my life, and I'll die without having accomplished anything at all. Tell me where I've improved, Jeanna!"

"Jon, you think I wouldn't notice by just being around you? Do you think I'm lying when I tell you that you are significantly better at all games we play every time we meet? Besides, you're only sixteen. You're way, WAY too young to be having an existential crisis. Just calm down and live your life. Trust me when I say you're doing fine."

"Games? GAMES?! Life isn't a game! It's just shit! All this time, what are you even trying to accomplish? Challenging me to games at random and crushing me! You're saying that I improved? You're just trying to prove that you're the best! It's not fun for me! It's really not fun for me! I hate it! Honestly, why don't you go search for opponents of your own caliber rather than destroying me all the time? That's what should be fun for a normal person, but you're anything but normal!

I have to force myself to remember that I'm better than most people at this kind of stuff, so I should be feeling proud of myself, but no! There's always this shadow over me that I can't escape, and it's yours! I can't even act normally around you because of how pathetic I feel! Seriously, what are you doing? You're a monster, Jeanna!"

And there it was. It was something I shouldn't have said, but it was too late.

Even if you say "oh, I take it back", strong words can never be completely forgotten. And this wasn't something I could take back, even if I wanted to. These were my raw, unfiltered emotions that had been stirring within me for years; it was a cathartic experience to tell her how I really felt.

Jeanna was in mild shock for a moment, then she also seemed to realize what I said. I could see her eyes starting to water slightly, which definitely hit me hard as well. An immovable wall, someone with the fortitude of a boulder, my confident older sister, was about to cry.

Dammit, don't cry now...

I didn't know whether that thought was directed towards her or myself, but that didn't matter right now.

"I see. So that really is how you saw it."

"You... knew?"

A violent swirl of emotions began to stir up again within me, but this time I had the rationality to keep them down. I needed to know how she would respond.

"Of course. Didn't I say you were easy to read? I had suspicions that this is how you felt, but you've just confirmed them."

Tears were more visible in her eyes now. Seeing such a strange sight made me unwilling to make another rash move. But I had to know.

"So then why..!"

"But you always accept, don't you?"

"What?"

"You always accept all of the challenges I issue. Most of them without hesitation."

This... was true. Whenever she asked me to play a game or participate in a challenge, I could never remember a declination. This meant that she only challenged me when I was certain to accept.

How is that possible...?

I had no response, and was forced to reconsider my disposition towards her.

"You see, Jon, I wanted to see you get better. To push past your own limits. And time and time again, you really have."

"..."

"I know you don't believe me, but you really have gotten close to beating me on several occasions. Sometimes your improvements were so rapid that it was scary!"

She laughed again, and this time I couldn't help but calm down a little. How could I not in front of that face? But I still had to know something. Something about her monstrous behavior.

"Then... Why did you never go easy on me?"

"Because I can't."

"Huh? Why not? If you go easy on me, then I'll at least feel like I can win next time! I wouldn't have been in despair all this time if you let me win a few!"

"That's true, but think about it this way. If I barely let you lose every time, you would gain false hope. Would you rather cling on to false hope for years? How would you react when you realize what I was doing? In a similar outburst, you would say I was toying with you. But... there's another reason why I don't. And it's somewhat of a weakness."

Jeanna has a weakness?

This information was almost like music to my ears. Even though I was already paying attention, this sentence from her made me sharpen my focus to a point.

"After seeing your reactions so far, you may really be thinking that it's impossible for me to have a weakness, right? But I do. My criminally insane determination to win and inability to take a loss... is the real reason I never went easy on you. Haha."

That's her weakness? What?

Her response was sincere, yet it was the funniest thing I'd ever heard. So naturally, I laughed.

She tilted her head slightly and wore a mildly surprised expression, but I knew that deep inside, she was bewildered beyond belief.

"That's... your weakness?!"

I finally was able to get a sentence in between my pathetic wheezing. Her expression hadn't changed. Her head was still tilted slightly, as if she really didn't have a clue as to what I was thinking.

"That's... such a terrible weakness! It's so stupid. That can't possibly be considered a weakness!"

She closed her slightly agape mouth, cleared her throat, and stared at the cooling coffee cup in front of her. Then, she gave a small, content smile.

"You're right. I guess it's a nice weakness to have, isn't it? I didn't think you were going to say that."

At that moment, I heard words from Jeanna's mouth that I had never heard before.

"I didn't think you were going to say that."

It was the first time living under her suffocating shadow that I managed to do something that caught her off guard. After years upon years of losing, something I did finally slipped by her.

"Can... I take that as a win in this game then?"

Jeanna gave another small laugh, and said, "You said life isn't a game, but aren't you treating it like one? So sure, why not?"

My first victory against her. Even if it was small and meaningless, it was still the first. I felt more liberated right now than I ever had in the past. The shadow of the insurmountable wall I lived under really was just another human being. I can't believe it took me this long to see that.

Just as I was about to feel relieved, I remembered something that seemed quite important.

"Wait... The game yesterday. I barely lost. I analyzed that game and it seemed like you were teasing me. I don't believe what you said is true... Didn't you go easy on me there?"

"Hmm... Well, how do I put this? I almost lost for real."

"Huh??"

"It's embarrassing, isn't it? I happened to play terribly, and you played way above your rating. It's just one game, but the stars almost aligned for you, Jon."

I almost beat her? Me? Beat Jeanna at chess?

I couldn't believe it. What should have given me a boost of confidence didn't feel real.

"... It really is scary, though... how quickly you improved, I mean. How did you do it?"

"Did I really improve that quickly?"

Jeanna narrowed her eyes at me, as if I were asking the dumbest question in the world.

"You climbed from 1000 to 2200 in two years. You're asking if that's fast? Hmph. Well, it doesn't matter too much to me... As your elder sister, it makes me happy to see lil' Jon grow up so strong~"

"Um... Like I said earlier, I have a friend who's quite good at this kind of thing... I guess..."

Now that I think about it, his personality may not be so different from my sister's. He's worse than her at everything, so I guess I couldn't feel significant pressure from him...

But how could I compare anyone in this world to my sister? It was just unfair. So I shook my head and explained the details about my best friend to her. His mindset was similar to hers, so it was possible that they could get along quite well.

"Hmm..."

After my explanation, Jeanna fell into a long, contemplative pause. After a while, she finally spoke up.

"I see. It's good that you have a friend, but don't get carried away by him."

"... What do you mean by that?"

"Oh... Nothing in particular. I guess I'm just being overprotective of my little brother? I shouldn't be saying much if he's the only good friend you have. After all, when I was sixteen I was the most popular girl in school and-"

"Okay! That's enough of that!"

Jeanna's popularity was the last thing I wanted to hear about right now. I quickly changed the subject.

"Oh, I know. Why don't you come to the chess club after school today? Since you guys have the same mentality when it comes to games, I can only imagine the look on his face when you kick his ass. Heh heh..."

"Oh..? Is he really so important that I need to take him down? Or is it a challenge? As you know, I can't back down from a challenge."

"Why don't we say it's a challenge, then. I challenge you to beat him as many times as possible in a row."

"Challenge accepted. Using my weakness to your advantage, now, are you? You really do learn fast. Now, now. Hurry on to school, or you'll definitely be late!"

Already?

I checked the clock on the wall to the right of where I was seated, which read 07:28. Thirty-two minutes before the start of school. Panicking, I quickly stuffed the rest of my breakfast down my throat. The eggs, toast, and fruit blended into a strange smoothie in my mouth. I almost gagged, but I stayed strong and forced the food into my stomach.

"Don't worry, I'll excuse your manners this time, think of it as a reward for your first win!"

What a lame reward for an extravagant accomplishment... and stop smiling at me like that again!

With breakfast done, dishes in the dishwasher, and backpack on my back, it was finally time to leave the house for school.

07:30. Thirty minutes before school. Leaving right now would let me be exactly on time for class. It was perfect. However...

"By the way, what did you drop on your rush to the dining room?"

I froze on the spot.

How does she know about that? There's absolutely no way she could have heard it fall!

"Um, nothing important! Just one of the pictures in the hallway near my room... don't worry about it, sis, I'll fix it after I get home."

"Okay, then! Have fun at school! Don't fail any of your tests today!"

Now, if I had a drink in my mouth, I definitely would have spit it out. Of course, this reaction made Jeanna laugh at me again.

"Seriously, go! You're guaranteed to be late now."

I checked my phone's clock. 07:31 and 27 seconds. If I hurried, maybe I could make it on time. But why would I do that if I was guaranteed to be late anyway?

So when I arrived at my first class, it was 08:13. I was thirteen minutes late, and had a disadvantage against my peers on the first test.

Chapter 4 - The Painting

Jeanna smiled and waved at Jon as he left the house. The door slammed behind him and she heard unhurried footsteps on the other side, lazily sauntering as if he did not care whatsoever about punctuality.

As soon as she confirmed that Jon would not be returning, her demeanor changed.

The smile from earlier faded completely. There were no traces of warmth left on her face. There was only a robotic indifference, and her eyes seemed nearly iced over. This was the unseen personality that unnerved Jon; the side she would never show him. And for good reason. If you were to see a completely different side of someone you thought you knew well, it would undoubtedly be jarring. If someone asked if this were her true nature, the answer wouldn't be a straight yes or no. Both sides of her could be considered her "true" nature. Like a coin, both sides of her existed simultaneously.

The affection she showed Jon was genuine...

This "friend" he's talking about... I'll have to make sure it's not harmful.

... as was the ice cold protection she vowed to offer.

Surprisingly, Jeanna was legitimately unnerved by Jon's recent improvements - they went way beyond her predictions.

All of his skills have made rapid improvement. Hand-eye coordination, logic, planning, awareness, and many other facets... Is this "friend" really responsible for all of this?

If this was true, the "friend" was an insanely capable individual. In other words, a huge potential threat. However, if this person was one of Jon's only true friends, Jeanna couldn't do much about it. Though she was always considering exterminating potential threats to Jon, she wasn't cruel enough to actually do it this time.

But who on Earth could threaten our family? It's highly unlikely for such a capable individual to even be a high schooler. Unless...

A stray thought entered her mind. It was not a likely possibility, but once it entered her head, she couldn't shake it away.

9X... But that should be impossible.

If it was truly 9X, Jeanna had a good idea of who this "friend" character was. She had known him for a long time.

Jeanna buried her head in her hands as she attempted to forge a positive outcome for this event.

"It's not too late... we can turn this into a new opportunity and still win."

If the friend was truly 9X, the only option Jeanna would have would be to play the "keep your enemies closer" card. And if that were to be the case, this turn of events was mostly a positive for her.

I wonder what that family is truly planning...

It made less sense the more she tried to think about it. Perhaps, it was a clue her cold-hearted personality couldn't crack.

"Oh well..."

As she mulled over the topic a little while longer, she decided to take a quick stroll around the house. Or rather, she had a very specific destination in mind. The hallway leading to Jon's room. Each of her footsteps on the hardwood floor, though not loud, seemed to reverberate endlessly against the walls in the quiet and lonesome house. If someone were here to witness this, they would feel an unnecessary rising tension as she proceeded closer to the entrance of the hallway.

"That Jon... he's never usually clumsy at all. I guess I really must have freaked him out yesterday. And the majority of his life, apparently."

With a wistful sigh, she continued her march; the floor transitioned from hardwood to carpet, and the lighting dimmed slightly.

"It's been a while since I've been here, looks like Dad renovated it a little? Oh, these pictures..."

Of course, the first thing she noticed when she entered the hallway was the empty slot to her right, as well as the backside of a canvas on the ground. However, she grew nostalgic once she saw the three other photographs, especially the one with all of the siblings together.

"Jeanne, Jonah... You guys are doing great out there. In these times, we need you to protect it better than ever. Now, I wonder what this last one is..."

She began to slowly lift the bulky frame from two of its corners. As soon as she was able to catch a glimpse of the painting, she immediately recognized it. She uncharacteristically paused for a long time, still holding the frame at an odd angle off the ground. Her previously indifferent expression warped into something impossibly cold. If Jon were to witness this sight, the wounds from his trauma would open, never to heal again. She gritted her teeth - Jeanna's eyes went wide and narrowed again. The entire atmosphere around her seemed to drop a few degrees. In fact, it literally did drop a few degrees. The thermostat went into overdrive as the heating for the house kicked in.

"... I was trying to forget about this, but it's almost time, isn't it?"

That's right. Today was the day. She had to prepare.

Jeanna let go of the corners of the frame, allowing the painting to fall back to the ground in the position it had been in earlier. As the painting remained face down on the carpet, she brusquely trudged out of the hallway, not looking back.

As Jon astutely knew, the subject of this painting was indeed a fictional work. Two oblong semi-ellipses of different heights crafted of an unknown material sat a few centimeters apart from each other. Right down the middle of the two, there was a circular carving, a semi-circle on each of the stones. A sphere of varying colors floated perfectly in the middle of the carving. A collimated beam of teal-colored light shot up into the sky from this sphere, electrifying the atmosphere around the whole structure.

The engraved plaque on the bottom of the frame which Jeanna had lifted read the name and artist of the work - "Monolith; Jeanne Xu".

Chapter 5 - Diminishing Returns

This is all bullshit!

The final bell rang, closing the curtains on exams for the day. Frustrated beyond belief, I threw my cheaply made mechanical pencil on the ground, where the plastic burst open, scattering the contents around the floor. As I pitifully sulked in my chair, I overheard an equally pitiful conversation that was slowly headed for the exit of the room.

"Why's he getting worked up over something so simple? What an idiot. I guess having an Asian last name doesn't make you one, huh?"

"Hey, leave us Asians out of this. We don't claim him."

"Hey, leave the rest of us humans out of this, too. We don't want him near us, either."

"Hahahaha!"

Seriously... calling finals "something so simple"? That's actually hilarious.

As the conversation left earshot, I sighed in relief. Those goons didn't know how to do anything but get good grades. I've always heard that the typical high school bullies are the jocks and athletic types, but it couldn't be more wrong in my case. The gym-goers were extremely friendly and they always motivated each other to improve themselves. They were my people.

The "intellectual" type, on the other hand... I had them beat in most other areas, so the only way they could attempt to harm me is with this sort of trash talk about grades on the edge of my hearing.

You know what, it's their lucky day that I don't want to retaliate. They're probably just so scared of my intelligence that they can't bear to be in the same room as someone a few years younger. That's gotta be why they treat me like that.

I tried to delude myself as I picked up the pencil and graphite I had carelessly hurled. As I did, I heard footsteps approaching at a leisurely pace. Without looking, I already knew who the culprit was.

"Hey," I mumbled, still not turning to look at him.

"Yo, Jon. Ready to lose again?"

This guy. He'd always boasted higher accomplishments in the academic department, and with a love for games, it was no surprise that he was the president of the chess club as well. He was also someone who would never go easy on me in a battle of wits despite knowing he was superior. Despite being one of the so-called "intellectual types" I despised, he was still my best friend.

"Of course not! I'm fired up right now."

"I can tell that much... Need help?"

He glanced at the debris on the ground and offered me a hand.

"... Sure."

He joined me on my hands and knees to clean up my mess. We gathered the remnants and tossed the dilapidation in the garbage.

"Alright, let's go."

Classes were done for the day, which meant it was time to begin the extracurricular activities. At this point in the day, I would normally just go home. But today was different, and I had expressed my interest in visiting the club to my friend earlier. We collected our belongings and started off.

"So? What did you think?"

Is he asking me about the final?

"Oh, it's totally nothing. Other than the fact that the one thing I don't study turns out to be the question worth the most points! What the hell is that upside down triangle thing, anyway? Did we even talk about that?"

"Of course we did. And it just so happens to be the day you fell asleep."

"Right. Of course... And you? What did you think? Wait, never mind. Why did I even ask..."

The kid had never gotten under a ninety-five percent on an exam, so there was no point in asking. But his next words raised my hopes a bit.

"Well, I did think it was difficult..."

Huh. If the smartest kid in the class thought it was difficult, maybe I'm not as dumb as I thought?

"I wasn't even 100% confident in one of my answers!" he continued.

"Man... I should have expected you to say something like that!"

I gave him a playful shove, and we both laughed in kind.

"Well, whatever. I'm glad that finals are over," I sighed.

We reached the outside of the clubroom, but we couldn't go in just yet. I wanted to try something.

"Wait. Let's play a game. Winner gets to do the club president duties first thing upon entry. Whatever those are."

To be honest, I kind of wanted to see how to be the president of a club. In the past, I'd never really paid any attention to leadership and practically freeloaded off of the benefits of being a useless member of society. But hearing what my sister said earlier about the "threshold of adulthood" made me reconsider my choices.

Because of this, the demand of the winner seemed somewhat strange, and my friend didn't fail to pick up on it.

"Oh? You *want* to try being club president for a day? That's unusual. I'd love to see it, but I don't want to lose, either. You'll have to give it your best shot."

"That's just like you; I've given you an incentive to lose, but you won't take it... Bring it on. I'm feeling kind of down after that last final, so let's play RPS-5. Rock Paper Scissors Lizard Spock, best of 3."

Actually, I had another reason for challenging him here as well. The minor victory I had won against Jeanna gave me some confidence in my abilities, and I was itching to play something as soon as the exams ended for the day. Of course, I didn't have to say this aloud.

"Hmm... alright. On shoot, then?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "Let's start."

The game to decide today's fate - Rock Paper Scissors Lizard Spock. A 5-way version of roshambo. The rules are simple; they're identical to normal Rock Paper Scissors. However, there are two extra options: Lizard and Spock. Each option beats two others and is defeated by the remaining two.

On the mental count of three, we simultaneously began chanting.

""Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!""

I extended my hand all the way, and opened my ring and pinky fingers on one side, and my middle and index on the other. The result - Spock.

He, however, had simply extended his hand all the way out with no hesitation. Four fingers and a thumb, fully extended. The result - Paper.

I let out a small whistle, impressed at his first immediate victory.

Paper disproves Spock. I was losing 0-1.

"Really, now, Jon? You're so easy to read!"

"Am I? That's a shame."

Obviously, I knew this was a bluff. The only person in the world who could read me so easily was Jeanna, and nothing could change that fact. The first round was nothing but luck. It's impossible for him to know that I'd have played Spock.

In classic roshambo, men, especially those who don't know any strategy, typically open with rock. Although the choice doesn't hold any more weight than the others, it's definitely psychologically comforting to hold out a fist right from the get-go. Obviously, my opponent isn't a moron. However, this is where reverse psychology can come into play. It's possible he could pick Rock even if he knows it's a typical starting move. Therefore, it's impossible to know if he will play Rock.

Conversely, women throw Scissors more often. It's definitely an opening move that's likely to win. Knowing this, I picked Spock. Spock smashes both Rock and Scissors. He knows this. However, there's no guarantee that he knows I will play Spock due to the logic of reverse psychology; it's possible I could have not picked Spock *because* it's a solid counter to common openings.

In a psychological match between two people who were both new to a game, the match would be pure luck. No strategies or tactics could be developed by either since neither knew what they were doing. In a similar fashion, when both players had effectively solved the game, it returned to pure luck. Once every strategy and tactic is known by both players, what can they do to outwit each other?

Therefore, the first throw was pretty much a toss-up.

This is also what made a 5-way version of RPS so much more exciting than the standard. Since so much of the first throw was down to luck, there's a 1 in 5 chance of a tie. In standard RPS, there's a 1 in 3 chance. Of course, there's the argument that more ties can make the game more suspenseful, but I'd rather just get the thing over with as soon as possible. I play to have fun, and ties aren't.

"Again."

"Of course."

We prepare for the second round. Once again, on the mental count of three, we chant.

""Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!""

I stuck only my index and middle fingers out sideways and made sure there was a gap in the middle. The result - Scissors.

Lo and behold, my opponent responds in kind with the same move as last time, a fully open hand. The result - Paper. A mirrored move, and a decent strategy. It's unlikely to want to make the same move twice, especially now that there's five options to choose from. Of course, if this was the only thing I knew, I would have hesitated to play Scissors. But, there was something else I had an idea of. To confirm, I looked at his hand. It looked to be shaking uncomfortably, as if he were trying to flex his muscles really hard.

Wow. It was a gamble, but it paid off. Who knew he still couldn't make that symbol with his hand?

"I've got Scissors, and you've got Paper. Scissors cut paper. That's one for me. Who's easy to read, again?" I taunted him.

"... paper. Right. The point goes to you," he reluctantly responded.

The score was tied 1-1.

Now, I think I've got him where I want. He looks pretty flustered at the moment. And would you look at that... He's even switching what hand he's using.

"Ready?" I said, making sure my tone didn't betray my confidence.

"Yeah, let's go."

For the final time, the chant resonated through the hall.

""Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!""

Four of my fingers were stuck together on top, while my thumb was across from them, resembling a "C". The result - Lizard.

My opponent, for the third time in a row, unleashed a fully open hand - Paper.

"Lizard eats Paper. 2-1, my victory," I said. And I gave him the upright Scissors. Some may call it the hand symbol for "peace" or "victory", but frankly, that's overrated.

"No way, dude. You knew?"

"Hmm? What's that? Knew what?"

I feigned innocence at his flustered words.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I take back what I said earlier about you being easy to read. Can you tell me how you knew that I can't play Spock?"

Yup, this was the kicker - this was how I beat him. The dude literally can't even make the Spock sign with his hands... It's a pretty dirty victory, but a win's a win. The odds were tilted in my favor when I decided the conditions of the game. There were several variants of RPS-5, but I specified that the two remaining slots *must* be Lizard and Spock.

Regardless of if he managed to play Spock with his other hand, Lizard poisons Spock, so I still would have won. In an effort to protect his pride, he had to play either Paper or Spock. It was checkmate.

"Oh, I just happened to overhear it back in the day on the elementary school playground... no big deal, right? I heard you watched Star Trek one day, and tried to make the Vulcan symbol, but couldn't. I took a chance that you still couldn't do it to this day, and would you look at that."

"Man... is that why you only wanted to play RPS-5? What's got you feeling so upbeat today? Especially after failing the final..."

I pretended like I didn't hear that last part. We usually did play more complicated versions of RPS, even going up to RPS-101, which didn't include Spock. But his judgement was correct - I indeed wanted something simpler after failing a final.

As for the bet... although I was willing to take a test of leadership by being club president for a day, I had to admit that I couldn't change overnight.

I'm still nervous about dealing with a bunch of people, it seems...

Anyway, this was definitely an opportunity! I could finally learn how to be a leader. I'd never really witnessed a club president's duties before. I was usually either late or absent, and I hardly paid attention to what anyone else was doing, since I didn't really care.

The going-home club is best, after all.

This was my first time actually being punctual.

We opened the club door to find a myriad of faces. The sound of the door alerted the members, and all of them eventually focused on me.

"..."

"So? What are you gonna do, Mr. President?" he asked me.

"Huh? How am I supposed to know?"

"Haha, today's pretty easy. We don't have any events planned, so we just need to check attendance. That's it for formal duties. You can do that much, right?"

"Uh, maybe."

My friend handed me a clipboard from his backpack and gave me a fake smile, as if to say, "You can do it!"

... Thanks.

I took the clipboard and stared at the people in the room. All of them were still staring at me. Needless to say, it made me *very* uncomfortable.

Do they have to keep doing that? ... I guess I have to say something...?

"Uh... I guess I'm the club president for today. Nice to meet you all. Here's the sign-in sheet. Thanks for coming today...?"

I walked up to the closest member, who I'd never seen before, who was seated at a desk. She had curly hair that reached past her chest and was wearing a denim jacket and long white pants. She also appeared to be chewing bubble gum.

I gave her the sign in sheet, on which she didn't put down her name. Instead, she just stared at me, chewing her gum.

"Um. Is there a problem?"

This was awkward. I tried to get her to say something, but no words came out of her mouth. Instead, she, very slowly, began to blow a bubble with the bright pink gum. It expanded past her nose, her cheeks, and even grew bigger than her head. Finally, it popped, leaving pink residue all over her face.

I was thoroughly confused.

What's going on? What am I supposed to do here?

After very slowly picking the gum off her face, she put it back in her mouth and began chewing again. A few more awkward seconds passed before she finally spoke up.

"Who are you?"

It took you all that time just to say that?

"I'm the... uh... temporary club president for the day?"

"... Really? That guy seriously allowed a dip like you to do that?"

... I didn't know what that meant, but it felt like an insult. Why was she getting agitated for no reason?

"Like I said, it's only for today, so there's no need to get nervous..."

"Nervous? Of someone like you?"

Oh, boy, here we go... What did I do this time?

I had a strange talent to agitate people around me for no reason, and it didn't help that I was socially awkward. I didn't know how to resolve the situation.

"... Sorry if I offended you. Please sign the sheet and pass it on so we can finish this as smoothly as possible..."

The only thing I could do was apologize. I didn't really care what people thought of me; I just wanted to get out of this situation.

"And why should I listen to you?"

Why is she making this so difficult?

Of course, I wasn't going to voice my thoughts. I was already regretting my decision to become temporary president.

"If you don't want to sign it, I can only assume you weren't present today, thanks."

I snatched the clipboard back before the girl could react and passed it to a guy who was sitting on top of a desk a few feet behind.

"Wait..!"

Ignoring the girl, I passed the sign-in sheet around, verifying everyone present. Apparently, the sign-in sheet would be sent to the school board to judge the club's activity. The more popular the club, the more funding it would get. Therefore, everyone was reminded to sign in.

After the signing, a few of the club members were still looking at me with wide eyes, and the rest were discussing something quietly among themselves.

Is it just me, or did the atmosphere change...

At this point, I felt like I was being treated like an exotic animal.

Well, whatever.

I ignored them and turned to face my friend.

It was worth noting that since I didn't show up very often, I would always demand a chess match with him whenever I did. However, this wouldn't be happening today, since I wasn't planning on playing.

He noticed this, and took the initiative to speak up.

"What's up? Scared of losing another chess match?"

"Pshh. You know how it is. You beat me most of the time, anyway."

I didn't want to admit it, but I was a little nervous to play. My win rate against him never went above 45%. But that was irrelevant today; it was a special occasion. I wanted to see how he stacked up against a certain someone. Maybe if I knew the result, I could relax my soul even more.

"Then why did you even come? On time, no less... are you healthy today? You didn't hit your head, right? No, I wouldn't lose to a concussed Jon. Your performance on the final definitely-"

"I've got a special guest coming today, and I guarantee your loss."

Once I said that, the hushed conversations in the background went completely silent.

Oh, I guess their attitudes make sense... A little bit.

I think... I'd finally figured out why these guys were acting so strange. They held the club president in such high regard that anything that came close to defiance against him was met with disdain. The same bubblegum blowing bit- I mean, girl, seemed especially angry.

"Club president? Guaranteed loss? Seriously, who are you? And Prez, why are you letting this clown do... whatever he's doing right now?"

I guess I could understand where she was coming from... Objectively speaking, the number one and number two players were on a pretty different level from the rest of the club. If a random guy came in and said that he knew someone that could get either one of us a guaranteed loss, he would probably be treated like a laughingstock.

The thing was, I shouldn't have been "a random guy". I was the aforementioned number two player. It was surprising and disappointing how long this question created conversation. When I looked closer, I saw that there were actually quite a few new kids I'd never seen before.

Oh jeez... how long has it even been since I last came here? Somebody please tell them something...

I looked around the room, but none of the club veterans wanted to speak up for me.

Why? Please defend me here, someone.

Of course, nobody could hear my inner plea.

Is it jealousy? Is it because I have the unshakeable number 2 spot despite being absent for God knows how long?

I understood that feeling. There came a point where no matter how hard you tried, you couldn't surpass the hurdle in front of you. For so many activities, I'd struggled to break through and could only watch as others effortlessly flew by. In this case, it was them stuck at the barrier and it was I who surpassed them. If this was the case, their resentment was reasonable.

Finally, the third-ranked player, Alex, began to speak up. The newbies focused on him to hear what the old fox had to say.

"Yea, I have no clue who he is. Guaranteed loss on the Prez? No way, of course he's bluffing!"

Silence resonated.

"..."

Dammit, et tu, Alex? Though it's not like you were my friend or anything in the first place...

"Yea, I've been coming here for the past six weeks and I've never seen him."

"Seven for me."

"Eight."

One after another, newbies testified to never having seen me despite their club activity.

I really haven't been here in two months? I guess time flies when you're not losing chess games.

It was impossible to get the club to calm down after that one. I'm glad I didn't need to perform any real "leadership duties" today. No one would have taken me seriously...

At that moment, the clock struck 4, and the door opened.

Punctual, like always... Perfect timing, too. Save me from this mess, please!

The guest of honor had arrived. All the attention on me dissipated; all eyes were on the door. Of course, without a bold claim such as guaranteeing the number one's defeat, this wouldn't have happened. Even if they believed it was impossible, I guess they couldn't completely kill their curiosity towards this mystery guest.

... Now believe me when I said I was relieved when I saw her. But another emotion immediately overrode that.

What the hell are you wearing, Jeanna?

"Yo," she said, like a typical... something. This wasn't her normal behavior. What was going on?

She was dressed in a dark gray sweatshirt hoodie, with the hood up, mind you, and light gray sweatpants. No trace of dignity whatsoever. I couldn't believe she would come to school dressed like this.

"Who's the punk I need to beat?"

She raised an eyebrow at me.

"By the way, you can't comment on my outfit when you literally have negative fashion sense."

"..."

I couldn't even be surprised anymore.

"Uh, yea, he's right over here... Jeanna, this is..."

"No need for introductions, I've heard all about you from lil' Jon here. I just need to beat you, right? Let's just get this over with."

Don't call me that here of all places!

"Oh? Interesting. I assume you're Jon's older sister? Not like it matters who you are, anyway. I won't give you any special treatment. This is what I say to all my opponents, regardless of who they are. Ready to lose?"

"I should ask you the same thing. Let's play."

The two challengers quickly set up the board.

Of course, this sudden entry was not taken very warmly. From what I've told her about the club, she should know that as well. Apparently she's trying to rile them up on purpose, and it's not helping my cause. Her audacious behavior was sending my negative reputation with the club even further down.

"Hey, seriously? She just walks in here like she owns the place?"

"Talking to the Prez like that? Talk about arrogant..."

"Who is that chick, anyway?"

I sighed quietly enough for no one around me to hear.

This is a problem. I didn't expect their reverence to border fanaticism. Don't just follow someone around because you think he's a god... learn to form your own opinions!

Hopefully they'd be hit with some reality after this game.

The game was close. It really was. Jeanna, playing on the black side, couldn't have been evaluated at more than -2.0 for most of the match. But the result was clear. Checkmate, her win.

Everyone was stunned into silence. Before anyone could react, Jeanna abruptly said, "Is that it? See ya."

She got up to leave, but was met with some mildly annoyed chatter.

"Hey, this guy said he knew someone who could give Prez a guaranteed loss. Although it was a win, it didn't look very guaranteed to me."

"Yea, let's see a rematch!"

They can't even take a loss on someone else's behalf?

"Hmm? Is that any way to treat a lady?" Jeanna inquired mockingly.

"What? Act like one, then!"

She started towards the door, and the absurd scene continued until *somebody* with some authority decided to speak up.

"Why not? Let's go again. Scared I'll beat you this time?"

There was a fire in his eyes that was rarely seen amongst normal people. Most people didn't witness this side of him, but he was like this every time he was against me. I recognized this look; it was one of burning determination to win. He wasn't going to back down from this declaration.

With those words, Jeanna stopped and turned her head back to look at us. Her eyes narrowed. "Oh? I was trying to go easy on you knowing this would happen, but you saw through it?"

"Of course. Even though your advantage was small in terms of material, you kept it consistently throughout the course of the match and had superior positioning. You're truly a fearsome opponent. I probably won't win, so let's go again."

After a heated staring contest, Jeanna complied and sat back down on the black side of the chess board.

"Fine. But we're playing on a one minute timer this time. Any complaints?"

"Not at all. As long as I get another fair match against you, the extra stuff doesn't matter."

Her expression was cold. His expression was heated. A bullet battle of ice and fire would rapidly consume the table in between them.

Once again, she was victorious. There was no holding back this time; she crushed him. The result to any doubters was clear this time.

"Let's go, Jon."

She grabbed me by the wrist and briskly headed towards the door.

"Huh? Um... okay?"

A repetition of a previous scene occurred: stunned silence with one person seemingly unaffected.

Jeanna quickly pulled me out of the room. As the door shut behind us in the hallway, a myriad of questions swam in my head.

"What are you doing?"

But I couldn't articulate any of them. Instead, I gave her this pathetically concise excuse for one.

Jeanna sighed as she tried to put her thoughts into words.

"There are a lot of things going on right now, but I guess the most important thing you need to know would be... Let's see, you know what diminishing returns are, right?"

"Huh?"

She let the hood fall off of her head as she explained.

"The more skilled you become at something, the more time and effort it takes to gain the same amount of skill."

"Well, yeah. So?"

Of course I knew what diminishing returns were. I was confused about where this conversation was going.

What does that have to do with anything...

"Do you remember what I told you earlier today? He's a dangerous opponent. He seems to be the type to enjoy losing."

"... I guess he can be like that. How could you tell so quickly?"

"I know because I'm the same way. I love playing against stronger opponents. I love losing against someone stronger. But that's a rare case nowadays; finding a difficult opponent is quite a task. I'm sure he feels the same way."

"Then why don't you just play chess online?"

"... I do. It's just not the same as over-the-board chess. Also, it's a massive time sink. Like I said, diminishing returns. I'd have to play an insane amount of chess at this point to get any better. It's not worth it. And you know that chess isn't the only thing I'm good at."

I then realized something. It was possible to optimize what you were "extremely" skilled at. If you balance your skills and skill levels perfectly, it can seem like you're a pro at everything, especially to the average person. In reality, you are far worse than a legitimate pro, but that didn't matter very much.

If an ant stood in front of two mountains, both would seem insurmountable, even if one mountain was over twice as tall in reality.

"Not only that... but here's what scares me... he's an insanely quick learner, especially if he loses against someone an order of magnitude stronger. I don't know how many matches it would take for him to catch up to me, but it wouldn't be very many. Normally, I'd be fine with someone surpassing my skill in a game, but..."

She glanced nervously back at the door.

Why is she so on edge today? There's definitely something she's not telling me.

"I don't get what you mean. I play against him all the time, but he's not nearly as scary as you. Although I guess he can get really fired up sometimes..."

I recalled the time I beat him and he flipped the table, demanding a rematch in the process. But that wasn't a good enough reason for Jeanna to be acting like this.

"What's going on with you today?"

Jeanna smiled bitterly.

"Thanks, Jon, I'm glad I look like a big and scary monster to you."

She stuck out her tongue to tease me, completely ignoring the question.

Ugh, she really is a scary monster when she wants to be, though...

Suddenly, the door opened, revealing a pale face with blonde hair.

“Hey,” he said.

"What the heck are you doing? I resign as temporary club president--forever. You may as well be starting a cult in that room with how you're treated. Me and Jeanna are outta here for now," I told him.

He stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

"Then I'll come along as well. I'm really interested in what's going on between you two. I just left the presidential duties to Alex. Punishment for trash talking you."

He winked at me.

I don't need that consolation...

Jeanna looked really uncomfortable at this point, as if she really didn't want to be near this guy. It took a little convincing, but she sighed and reluctantly agreed to bring the psycho along with us.

We walked in silence towards the exit doors of the building.

"Aren't you two gonna say anything to each other... Are you really siblings? Where's the trash talk?"

I wasn't going to voluntarily answer that question, and Jeanna didn't seem to have any plans to speak up, either. So the silence continued.

We eventually walked outside towards the commons. Eerily enough, it was deathly silent outside as well. Barely any sounds of nature reached our ears.

Suddenly, Jeanna spoke up.

"Hey, Jon. If you were stranded somewhere remote, do you think you could muster your will to survive?"

"Huh?"

She's blindsided me at nearly every opportunity today with these strange questions and statements... I wonder if everything really is okay today...

"You heard what I asked... would you?"

"If it really happened, then yeah. I'm not actively trying to get myself killed here."

"Is that so? Thank goodness..."

She turned away and hid her face in her hood.

She seems especially relieved after hearing that answer. Don't tell me I'm going to be shipped to a random island right now?

Maybe she was just being overprotective of me, but seeing her that relieved made me smile, too.

Suddenly, we were hit with a small earthquake.

"What the hell?"

Something was wrong. It wasn't as if earthquakes were uncommon in our area. In fact, they were not rare. It was *because* of this that I was freaked out. I didn't know how to describe it, but it didn't feel normal.

No, can this even be called an earthquake?

"You guys are feeling this, right?"

"Yeah. It's definitely strange."

"..."

The small earthquakes I'd experienced in the past often started with a small jolt and progressed to slightly stronger jolts. However, this one felt like an eerily consistent vibration, as if it were meticulously played at a calculated frequency. It didn't last long, nor was it destructive. But it was odd enough to be memorable.

Actually, I feel like I've felt this type of earthquake before...

The vibration passed as quickly as abruptly as it started.

Jeanna, who ignored my previous question, spoke up as soon as it subsided.

"Hey, on second thought, let's not go towards the park. Let's go around towards the commons..."

"... Why?"

"Um... you know how they have that mascot statue there? I don't want to admit it, but... that thing really scares me..."

I knew which statue she was talking about. It was a fairly large brass statue of a wolf, our school mascot. And it wasn't very well crafted. It definitely fell within the uncanny valley in terms of how cute it was. However, there was no need to worry, because...

"They got rid of that statue last year. I do admit it was pretty creepy, though."

"Oh... are you sure? I still don't want to go that way, it was horribly made and still gives me chills."

"It'll be fine! It's not like it's cursed. Nothing's gonna happen in the park, okay?"

My friend only looked to put fuel on the fire; Jeanna didn't look convinced and didn't lighten her demand.

"... Fine. We'll go around."

I had to reluctantly agree.

"Thank you~"

We changed our path and silently continued on. The awkwardness from the beginning of our little stroll hadn't let up.

After a minute, we arrived at the outdoor commons.

That's odd. Why are there so many people here?

Even though the commons were one of the busiest places in the school, it was well after curricular hours. Despite that, there appeared to be over fifty people in the area. This was unusual.

Especially with the weird earthquake that just happened... Nobody evacuated?

"What's going on here today?" I asked. I had to know. Something really didn't feel right.

"I don't know. There weren't any school-scheduled events for the commons today. Hey, Jon's sister. Why did you bring us here?"

"..."

Jeanna didn't respond.

"Jon's sister, you better tell us what the hell is going on."

My friend apparently also felt like something was not right, believing Jeanna to be a culprit of some sort. He aggressively approached her, but I quickly restrained him.

"Hey, calm down... It's not like she brought everyone here on her own for nefarious purposes or something. There's gotta be a simple explanation, right?"

Though I wasn't immune to the strange atmosphere, I trusted Jeanna with everything I had. Whenever she was around, I felt safe.

"What? Of course I didn't plan this event. How could I get this many people here at this time by myself?"

Jeanna gave a flustered response.

At this point, I didn't know what to think. She sounded genuinely surprised, which was odd given her general composed nature.

I wanted to believe that I was right and he was wrong, but Jeanna's odd answer made me feel even more uncomfortable.

“So… Is something about to happen?” I asked.

As if on cue, a beacon of bluish-white light suddenly shot upward from the center of the school's commons area. Cracks started appearing across the sky, as if someone were driving piles into glass in a sloppy polka-dotted pattern. The cracks from the small holes extended into even smaller fractals of branches that expanded radially outward. Panic ensued throughout the campus. In a peaceful world like ours, something of violence on this scale was sure to traumatize everyone who experienced it. It appeared that no one would make it out alive. This is what my instincts were telling me, even though I'd obviously never seen anything similar to it before.

"What's going on?" my friend hurriedly asked.

"It's not like I have a clue, either, man. Why are you asking me?"

"... Go."

My sister, normally so caring, so gentle, had an unusually agitated look on her face and an icy look in her eyes.

"What? What do you mean? What's going on?" I replied.

Go where? I thought, but thinking about it clearly, there really was only one place to go.

"Just leave! I've been trying to prepare you for this your whole life! You're not about to render my efforts nil!"

This is really my sister, isn't it? What's with that vocab? Is that her true nature? And... preparing me for what?

"Why are you so mad all of a sudden?" I inquired.

Most likely realizing her abnormal condition, she suddenly froze and took a deep breath, which softened her features back to normal.

"Listen, Jon. As you can probably tell by now, it's not safe here. If you want to survive, you must leave. I'll take care of things on my end. Just trust me, okay?"

"... okay."

How can I say no to her when she's looking at me like that? I looked around the world again, most likely for the final time.

I don't really get what's going on, but I trust you, sis.

I turned away from my sister's slightly bewildered smile which seemed to say, "You can really abandon me that easily, huh?" and started off towards the commons.

I'm not abandoning you. Don't you know of a little something called trust?

"Come with me, dude." I hollered towards my friend.

"Uh, o-okay! I'm not a third wheel or anything in this situation, right?"

"..."

This guy. Even in a chaotic situation like this, he's still able to keep his head straight and joke around. As expected of someone with great leadership capabilities.

Slowly, step by step, I started off towards the light.

As I ran towards the beacon, it seemed like its light was expanding towards me as well - it seemed like it was rushing towards me faster than I could ever imagine. Then, both pairs of footsteps slowed to a stop. Exhausted, I turned around to look at my friend who was struggling to keep up.

I told him, "Dude, I don't think I can make it any farther... This thing's too bright... And for some reason, it's getting pretty hard to run..."

"Seriously, Jon? I'm sure... even someone as dumb as you... can figure out the world's ending or something, and this light is our only hope! If you can't make it, you're really not gonna make it!"

I know what you're thinking. You can probably guess that I haven't truly given up yet, right? I guess you're not too wrong, but...

"So the world's ending, you think? Isn't that quite the conclusion to come to just from what we've seen today? ...Yeah, I know. I'm just getting both of us riled up for no reason, aren't I? I just got Mr. know-it-all over here to say something really dumb!"

"Shut up! It's not like you're that much dumber than I am! Anyway, who knows how long we're gonna last here! ...How about this? Let's play a game."

"A game, huh? You can't seriously mean..."

"When it comes down to a game, Jon, I'm always serious. And you know what it's gonna be."

This is how he always is. Whenever I'm feeling down about myself, he always brings the one thing to light a fire within me again. A game. But it wasn't even going to be a contest. When it came down to physical ability, there's no way I would lose against him.

"Of course. First one to reach the light wins, right? Bring it on. This is just like you; always picking useless fights with me... Let's go."

With the pseudo-motivational speech accomplishing its task, two pairs of running footsteps could be heard once more. The end was in sight.

Just a little bit farther, now...

Each step closer to the goal was more difficult than the last. It wasn't particularly exhausting, but the already blinding light wouldn't stop getting brighter. Eventually, the light became so bright that I couldn't tell if my eyes were open or closed. My steps seemed to become more and more hurried, as if running on a treadmill that was going too fast. But I couldn't stop now, or else who knows what would happen to me? Faster. Faster. And then...

Chapter 6 - The Anomaly

Two beings stood in a virtual space. Or rather, they *existed* within the space. There was no need for standing, as they were a pair of consciousnesses that simply *existed*. Their age and gender were unknown. There was no need for such things here. They could communicate instantaneously, and not much else was relevant.

"The time has come. The suitables will arrive soon. What shall you do about them?" One asked the other.

"Leave them alone for now," it responded. "They should fare well in their new environment. And even if we wanted to... We don't have many resources to aid the miscellaneous suitables. We were instructed to save it for him."

"For him... What are you planning on doing with him?"

"We will test him, of course. Look where he is now."

"...! Do you really think... this is the appropriate method?"

"It's necessary. There are some aspects of him that are still lacking. He needs strength."

"I agree, but there has to be another way."

"There are other methods, but this is the most optimal. We need to build our strength as quickly as possible."

"You're right about that... What do we do about the anomaly?"

Indeed, even though he and the suitables were a concern of high priority, there were more pressing matters at hand. For example, the third and fourth presences that had suddenly appeared within the system. This was an issue that threatened the existence of this entire world. Invasion of their system shouldn't have been possible as far as they knew, so they dubbed it "the anomaly".

"He takes priority. If the anomaly claims him, it's over. His survival is paramount, and we must defend him at all costs. We need him to get stronger as soon as possible so he can sufficiently aid us."

"Understood... then are the preparations complete?"

"Yes. However, there's one final thing that we could add..."

And in the base camp of the new world, it left two messages...

Chapter 7 - Last Hope

A voice echoed in my dreamlike state.

"Do you think you [can] muster your will to survive?"

I opened my eyes as the light dissipated from existence. A high pitched ringing noise resonated within my head. I was lying down on my bed looking straight up at the ceiling. As I became fully conscious, I realized that I had a small headache.

What happened last night? I'm not hungover, am I?

I hit my forehead with the palm of my hand and scolded myself.

What are you doing... The last of the exams are today!

I was still wrapped up in the comfort of my blanket, and my body refused to leave its warmth. I knew that if I got up, I'd be hit with a blast of cold air from my poorly ventilated room. But now was no time to sit around. Finals were important, after all. I couldn't just go about failing my classes. With the energy of a thousand suns, I pushed my back off of the mattress until I was sitting upright. My headache intensified.

Just gotta get some water...

I stretched over to my nightstand where I normally kept my metal water bottle. And thank goodness it was there. After quickly downing the contents of the container into my mouth, my headache eased slightly. As my groggy brain stabilized, I noticed that I hadn't changed out of what clothes I was wearing yesterday.

You lazy fuck... you somehow made it to your own room, but couldn't spare the extra effort to get these last bits of clothes off of yourself before hopping into bed?

Berating myself, I walked over to check on what was really important. My computer. And the chess match from yesterday. Or was it two days ago? Not bothering to remember petty details like that, I hastily opened the replay. My opponent was... someone, but that wasn't the important part. What was important was that I had lost miserably. There were only two people I knew in real life that could beat me so easily. One of them was my sister Jeanna, and the other one was the president of the school chess club and my best friend...

...

Huh? Why can't I remember his name? What's going on?

I couldn't remember the name of my best friend. Or was he my friend at all? Who was he? All I remember was what he vaguely looked like. Maybe some of the color palettes that you could use to paint a picture of him, but that was it... I must have really hit my head on something if I was drunk.

Come to think of it, my chess match was supposed to be against Jeanna, wasn't it? When is this from?

I checked the date on the file.

1/1/1970. The beginning of Unix time.

That's really odd... did I factory reset my computer a few days ago?

I checked the current date on the bottom right corner of the screen. 1/3/1970.

So the game was not yesterday's, but the day before... ahh, I must've seriously gone all out yesterday, then. I don't remember a thing.

As I glanced at the bottom right of the monitor, I realized something else.

No WiFi?

I clicked on the icon. But it revealed nothing.

No internet connections available?

This wasn't a big deal. I restarted my computer and waited a few seconds for it to be operable again.

I checked once again only to find the same message in the corner. I still had no WiFi.

A couple more restarts yielded the same result.

This was really strange. Even if the router in our own home was going haywire, the computer should at least pick up the surrounding signals from neighboring houses. But that wasn't the case here. There was radio silence.

Well, the internal WiFi card might be busted... whatever, I really don't want to check on that right now.

It was already past seven o clock. Less than an hour before school. This time, I really *had* nearly overslept. Maybe I should've been grateful for my parents waking me up a little early the past couple of days.

I wonder why they didn't wake me up today. Maybe they had something going on at work?

I put on some new clothes, brushed my teeth, washed my face, and headed towards the door leading out the hallway all under three minutes.

Once I closed the door behind me, I immediately noticed a few differences in the hallway alone.

First, the painting with only us, the Xu children, as kids. This photo clearly had to be doctored, because I'd never seen it before.

Or maybe it was a second take that went well?

Jeanna and I were identical to the one I previously knew - she still had the confident smile and gesture to go along with it, and I was but a small child looking clueless as always. The difference was with the twins. Rather than looking away from each other contemptuously, sincere grins were plastered on their faces. A perfect pose for a picture. Seeing both of them like that was slightly

unnerving. They always had some sort of argument going on, so how could they fabricate this genuine sort of smile during the same shoot?

The second difference was the picture of my parents. It was replaced by a completely new photograph of two people I'd never seen before. They were slightly older than my parents, and they seemed like a wealthy American couple from the middle of the 20th century.

I feel like I've seen their clothes before...

Something dawned on me then. I looked at their sleeves, then I turned to look at the third photograph, the one with a four or five year old Jeanna in an unknown background. A match. The couple from this unknown black-and-white photo matched the attire of the couple standing behind Jeanna. Black leather gloves on the man, dainty white gloves on the woman. I looked for the engraved plaque on the bottom of the picture. The one I knew had the names of my parents on it, but this one merely had a number - "10". No information about who these people could be...

So she knew something about them? Who are these people, really? And where is she now? Where are Jonah and Jeanne? Where is... he?

As I walked forward through the hallway, I realized that I had many questions that I should know the answer to, but didn't. I approached the end of the hall, and I let my hand rest on the right wall. The third difference; the painting of the monolith was gone. All that remained was the white background.

What's going on here? Am I dreaming?

Believe it or not, it's quite common for a dream to start like your normal day with some minuscule differences that you typically ignore. I've had many of those. Actually, since your dream brain shuts down all concepts of logic, even normally impossible occurrences are given a free pass, and you let them happen without batting an eye.

There was only one way to find out - a reality check.

In a dream world, even though your brain is on overdrive, it's impossible for it to perfectly recreate everything. Reality checks take advantage of this fact. There are certain actions you can take that should be possible in the real world that aren't in a dream world.

Example number one. Reading. Written text is never a constant in a dream. Every time you look at it, it will change. So I shifted my gaze towards the plaque of the unknown photo. It still read "10".

No dice, huh?

The reality check was a failure. But one failure doesn't guarantee anything, so I moved on to another test.

Example number two. Breathing. The breath in your dreams is always regulated by the one of your real body. So even if you pinch your nose, you should be able to breathe normally.

"..."

But I couldn't breathe with my nose pinched. Even with two failures, I still wasn't convinced, so I had to try one more thing.

Example number three. Hands. For some reason, your hands are almost never the same as they are on your real body. So I looked down and examined my hands.

One, two, three, four, five digits on each hand...

I flipped them over and re-counted. Nothing was out of the ordinary. Since it was nearly impossible for three reality checks to fail within a dream, I came to the conclusion that this was indeed reality.

Even though they were only pictures on a wall, something about the world still seemed a little off. But I couldn't place my finger on it. And even if I did know, the likelihood that I could do something about it was low. So I forgot about it and headed towards the kitchen to have some breakfast.

That's when I noticed another strange thing. No one else was home. There wasn't a trace of human activity. No evidence that anyone had been home for a few days. Of course, the house still remained pristine, but none of the kitchen tools and appliances looked like they'd been touched. Wasn't today supposed to be a special occasion? An extra family member was supposed to be home today... that's right. Jeanna was supposed to be here. Or else how could I have played chess with her just a few days ago? But it was clear she wasn't here now. Instead, in the place she normally sat was a handwritten note.

It was folded up neatly in thirds, and the cover read - "For you, our last hope". I opened it up, not sure what to expect.

It merely read the following: "Survive. And win."

The author remained anonymous - it wasn't even marked with initials.

It was so sloppily written that it couldn't possibly be Jeanna's handwriting, which meant someone else had to have been here. But I didn't know who it could be, especially with the house in its current condition. The pictures on the wall had been replaced and the house was clean. Who would do such a thing?

If this was a joke, it was in poor taste. I discarded that possibility. No one in my family would tell jokes this bad, which meant that I genuinely had to survive something...?

Our last hope? Why?

...

I was drawing a blank. I really didn't feel like being someone's last hope, and I didn't even know what for. Being a stranger's last hope was way too nerve-wracking for very little reward... if I actually cared. Which meant the only thing left to do was go on about my day like I didn't see anything.

I chucked the note in the trash, crunched down some dry cereal, and opened the door to the outside world.

Whatever's going on, I'll do my best to ignore it.

Chapter 8 - Universal Threats

An emergency meeting was called in the company's main HQ building. The timing was odd; nothing had been happening for a while now. Peace had generally reigned throughout the universe ever since the mega corporation had owned a vast majority of the major travel and arms businesses in existence. So it was odd that a level 0 alert, the most dangerous possible, was being discreetly sent to a few executives in the building.

Once everyone gathered in the divination-proof meeting room, questions poured forth.

"Hey, do you know what's going on? How is it possible for a threat to the entire universe to exist?"

"Level 0? Are you crazy, Boss? At least go with a 1. Do you know how ridiculous this sounds right now?"

"If this is accurate, though... this is more than we can handle, isn't it? I'm nervous about this..."

That's right. A level 0 alert was instituted. A guaranteed threat to the entire universe. Looking at it from a logical perspective, there was no reason for such a threat to even exist. Everybody looked in the same direction, demanding an answer.

On one end of the oblong table, a middle-aged gentleman spoke up. Despite his looks he was over 100 years old, and he looked as sharp as ever. No one would doubt his ability to command, despite his true age. This man was the owner of the supermassive company, and the men in the room were his closest partners. Of course, if anyone else were to speak up like this without permission, they would be severely punished. The fact that they were allowed to act like this in close quarters was a sign of mutual trust. The company had been through some rough times, and now it was prospering more than it was ever thought to be possible. And through thick and thin, this man had remained the leader.

"High energy beings detected, gentlemen."

Every being in this universe had a certain energy level. The word "high" was too vague. It could mean almost anything, including above average. But everyone present knew. If the alert level was 0...

"How high..?" Someone hesitantly asked.

"Enough to warrant a threat level of beyond universal rank."

The answer, which should have been obvious, shook the room. Everyone's heart seemed to stop. The deathly silence was intensified by the soundproof room, and nervous swallowing could be heard.

Finally, someone mustered the courage to speak up to break the unproductive silence.

"Um, Boss, you said beings, plural, right?"

"Right. There are two."

Some of the executives gulped with stress.

"My God... The fact that there's a new threat ranked beyond universal comprised of two beings... That means that each one should be a universal-rank threat, right?"

The boss reluctantly shook his head.

"Wrong."

"What?"

"There are two of them... And they're *both* ranked beyond universal."

Silence filled the room once more, and those who tried to remain stoic finally showed reactions.

"Gentlemen, I wish that were the end of it. Though there are two beings beyond universal rank which have recently appeared, this does not include the appearance of the multitude of beings ranked at sectoral level and beyond."

Nobody could stay quiet anymore.

"Ah... Then... it's even worse than alert level 0, isn't it?"

"That's correct. Ironically, level 0 was the most urgent alert I could authorize."

"Has... anything like this even happened before?"

The Boss hesitated.

"I don't know for sure, but it's rumored that the last time something like this happened, the Operator was created."

The Operator. A virtual database that tracked everything's statistics, and quantized/quantified energy levels. The introduction of such a thing changed the entire existence as they knew it. No one alive even knew of anything before the Operator existed, and life without it was unfathomable.

"And that was only with one being ranked beyond universal. Now, there are two. In addition to that, there are nearly a hundred new sectoral level threats as well."

"So, you're saying that something big is going to happen that affects all of us... something on the level of the Operator? Or something even bigger?"

Indeed, the Operator's introduction to the world was similar to the invention of fire; it was probably the biggest reason for modern day technological advancements. To think that another similar event would unfold soon...

"It's not guaranteed, but it's possible. On the other hand, the destruction of the Operator is likely as well. I don't think I need to state it again, but we're dealing with something very dangerous here. But on the positive side, we can deal with it with a relatively small amount of manpower. We only need a hundred MKS ships."

The atmosphere, which was already greatly disturbed, could no longer be contained. The executives raised their voices at their leader, barking one question after another.

"How can two threats beyond universal AND a hundred sectoral threats be taken care of with that number of MKS units?"

"Where are they located?"

“Where did they come from?”

"Why was the alert sent in secret?"

"Why didn't you act earlier?"

There were seemingly more questions than answers now. But the Boss held up a hand, indicating his wish for silence. Reluctantly, the executives regained their composure.

"One at a time, gentlemen. Firstly, I *did* act immediately. The instant I recognized the anomaly, I called everybody here. Although the initial energy levels of the beings were exceedingly high, they disappeared rapidly. I'm not sure what this means to be precise, but the fact is that they are currently low level. However, the longer we leave them alone, the more dangerous they will become.

"The alert was sent discreetly because although it's a potential threat to the entire universe if left unchecked, it's very possible to deal with it with a small amount of resources. Their origins are unknown as well. However, I can say for certain that they were not recently created by our competitors. As for their locations... They are scattered throughout the expanse, with the second-most dangerous one residing in Sector Omega."

At this point, it was hard to surprise the group. The location, sector Omega, was the most dangerous sector in the entire universe. No lone traveler could escape from there unharmed. In fact, nobody on record had visited that sector and returned alive. The ones that did, however, were kept under wraps by Boss and his company. In fact, the company knew of a guaranteed safe trajectory to and from the planet thanks to the data gathered by these unassuming travelers. However, just because the route was guaranteed didn't mean it was cheap. The amount of preparation and resources the trip required was headache-inducing.

However, the executives didn't fret. If Boss said so, the mission would be a surefire success. This was how much the team trusted themselves.

However, one of them wasn't completely convinced.

"It's great that we can take care of one of them, but what about the other one?"

With the mission's guaranteed success consuming their thoughts, nobody questioned the logistics of the plan. For a moment, it seemed like everyone forgot that there were *two* high level threats that they needed to keep in mind.

"On that front... There's a problem. Its location is slightly more troublesome."

"..."

The Boss just stated the impossible. How is it even possible for a location to be more troublesome than the most dangerous location ever?

"More troublesome? How so?"

"It's unknown."

"Un...known?"

"Right, the second threat's location is unknown, which is why we're only sending a hundred small ships towards the known threat locations. The majority of our manpower needs to be spent looking for it, otherwise who knows what'll happen."

This was seriously a problem. Even the man himself seemed nervous. Seeing their ever-so-confident leader nervous for the first time truly made them comprehend the gravity of the situation.

Knowing this, the end of the meeting was rushed.

"We're sending as many ships as possible on sortie. I've sent each of you a list of subsidiaries that can allow the most efficient search method across the expanse. As for five of you, remain here with me. The rest, move out at once!"

"Yes, sir!"

Chapter 9 - Ascertaining the Status Quo

As soon as I opened the door, I quickly realized that I couldn't just "ignore it".

The first issue arose immediately. I had no mode of transportation. There was nothing to aid my journey outside the house; I had to rely on my own two feet. Although this discouraged me a bit, it wasn't enough to break my spirit. Knowing I'd have to rely on a bit of my own energy, I decided to head back inside and pack some survival essentials into my backpack.

Three of these chocolate granola bars oughta suffice...

Okay, maybe they weren't essential for survival, but they were bound to boost my energy, so they were good enough.

I stepped outside for the second time today, and I finally left the confines of my property. However, I quickly noticed another problem. The neighborhood was... practically crumbling apart. My house and a few others around it were fine, but after walking a short distance, it was easy to find houses that looked as if they'd been there for quite a few years unattended. Some of them even had loose shingles, or were windowless. In addition, there were no signs of people. In a suburban area like this, at this time of day, most families would be in the process of their daily commute. This stark contrast to the neighborhood I knew was unsettling to say the least. It made me realize how much atmosphere people took up.

Now that I think about it, people aren't the only thing missing...

As I subconsciously started to observe my surroundings a little more, it wasn't hard to find other things out of place. There were no wild fauna, for one. Not that there would be very much in a densely populated neighborhood, but there were no rabbits, birds, stray cats, or anything of the sort. There was absolutely nothing. Not even crickets or cicadas chirping broke the silence. With the absence of living beings, even the slightest breeze was deafening, creating odd howling noises as it passed through various crevices in the decrepit structures.

In addition, the normally well-kept yards of our neighbors were a little too lush; the yards were becoming overgrown with grass, and various weeds could be seen sprouting out of the cracks of the driveways. I could even see some moss growing in shadows at the base of the walls.

What the hell is going on? Where am I?

I was beginning to feel like I was in the twilight zone or something equivalent. Imagine leaving your house in the morning only to find odd inconsistencies and no people wherever you looked. I didn't have to imagine it; it was literally happening right in front of me. I was genuinely starting to get freaked out.

The only positive thing about the status quo was that the weather was ideal. The sun was peeking out from behind sparse clouds, and the sky was crystal blue. It was warm enough to make me feel complacent but not hot enough to make me start sweating.

Despite my odd surroundings, I pressed forward in the direction of the school.

Ah, what am I doing... I don't even like school, but now that this situation has come up, I'm going straight there.

This strange scenario made less sense the more I thought about it.

If there truly were no people here, there was most likely no authority. Why was I still going to school?

Why was there nobody in the house? Why did it seem like there hadn't been anyone in the house for a few days?

Why was there nobody... in general? Even the local stray cat...

How was it possible for the neighborhood to look like this in such a short amount of time?

How could the world I know be this creepy?

And most importantly...

Why is there no WiFi?

The more I thought about it, the less sense it made. And when the following thought entered my head, I couldn't get it out.

Wait... world I know? Do I really know this world?

It was a fact that my surroundings were incongruous with what I was familiar with.

I pulled out my smartphone and stared at the screen for a few seconds, attempting to rack my brains for more clues. The date on the phone was the same as it was on my computer. The third of January, 1970. I also had no service.

After contemplating for a few minutes, I came to a conclusion. It was one that didn't make sense.

But my whole situation doesn't make sense! ... If this is not a dream, and it's not the world I know, then... there's no way right? ... Why me?

Had I been transported to the far future where everything was crumbling? Was I in a post-apocalyptic scenario? Would zombies start coming out of the ground?

If it wasn't this, then there was another possibility.

Maybe it was those isekai light novels I'd been addicted to recently, but I was starting to think I had been taken to another world. I wasn't sure, and the other possibility seemed more likely. But if that were the case...

Nothing is going to change. I'm still going to school.

Education was important.

I'm totally not scared of the possibility of being in an entirely unknown new world, regardless of if it's the far future or something else entirely.

In the past, I'd imagined myself as the protagonist of a post-apocalyptic novel. I would count on my hands how many days it would take for me to die. I'd at least surpassed the instant death point, so it could only get better from here.

I'd also imagined myself as the protagonist of an isekai novel. The conclusion I came to was, "it's like traveling abroad, but with way more culture shock", depending on how different the new world was from Earth. It's entirely possible that the new world was an alternate version of Earth. Still, traveling abroad was a personal nightmare. Due to the fact that I didn't have very many friends in school, and my best one was a masochist, I didn't have the best social skills.

Or maybe it's the other way around... because of my social skills, I don't have many friends? No, that can't be right.

Regardless of what order this happened in, the fact was that I wasn't very good at communicating with strangers, much less with those who didn't even speak the same language or shared no culture. I'd always imagined "another world" as the extreme version of traveling abroad. After all, most of the worlds in these isekai novels really were completely different, with magic systems and stuff. If these worlds were real, the combinations of unknown things would most likely create a wildly unimaginable culture, resulting in the worst possible culture shock on Earth multiplied by 10.

Those stories where the protagonist gets taken to a world seemingly tailored to his personal benefit always made me cringe. They have no plot, and the protagonist is a walking deus ex machina. Yet these stories are still wildly popular, because they're "relatable" to a certain subset of people. Take a no-name no-life out of their bedroom and place them in a world where they're practically a god. Wouldn't it be fun if it happened to you? No wonder these types of things are looked down upon by the society at large. Why would a hardworking citizen enjoy a story about an unemployed person becoming a god?

The problem was, if my isekai hypothesis were true, *I'm* the one being transported to another world. This brings up a few issues of my current state.

1. I'm unemployed.

2. I lack social skills.

3. I'm lazy.

4. I'm practically a nobody.

Seriously, though. I'm in high school. You expect me to be employed? I guess the universe doesn't care about things like that...

I was still technically unemployed... so, once again, if and only if my hypothesis were true, this means that this world is one of the following:

a) Crafted around my wants, allowing me to become a god amongst men.

Yea, right.

b) A mistake.

Possible.

c) In need of my help, and I was the "hero".

... No chance. What kind of damsel in distress tells you to survive?

... or...

d) A boot camp to correct my behavior.

... Well, the first and third options are highly unlikely, and none of the others are appealing at all. Seriously, why me...

Trying to find the answer, I thought of everything that happened yesterday.

Come to think of it, yesterday was a pretty strange day in general.

I nearly broke down over yelling at Jeanna; I claimed a "victory" for the first time against her - an anomaly. Then, I was late for school. Then, I failed a test. Nothing wrong there. But then, I went straight to the club room... on time. And then, chess... and then... There was a weird atmosphere between the three of us. And then...?

?

What happened after that? Why couldn't I remember?

Had a whole day really passed? Was yesterday even "yesterday"? Was my headache this morning really just a bad hangover, or were my memories missing for some other reason?

What's wrong with my head? Why can't I think properly?

I must be going crazy. I don't know how or why, but there's no way I was in the far future or a new world. That would be literally impossible. I must have gotten really drunk and had a bad hangover. That's the most logical explanation to why I can't think straight.

That still doesn't explain why I can't even remember my best friend's name... or where Jonah and Jeanne are...

As I was pondering yesterday's events, I recalled the time I spent with Jeanna. I remembered how strange she was acting - asking random questions and becoming startled at minor events. I remembered how *he* had confronted her about what happened.

That's right. She had to know something was up. If there's anything I don't know about, she definitely does.

With that, I gave myself a goal. In the midst of the chaotic swirl of thoughts I was having, one thing set my mind straight. Find Jeanna.

That's right. Trying to comprehend the details will only make my head hurt more. I already resolved myself to ignore everything that was going on, right?

The good thing is, the neighborhood's layout happened to be exactly the same as I knew it, so I didn't have to waste extra brain power trying to create a mental map of the area.

The farther I walked, the more dilapidated the houses became, adding to the unsettling atmosphere. Eventually, they started looking like they had been hit with wrecking balls, hit with a massive earthquake, or both. Despite witnessing all this, I continued my trek through the frontier.