

The Void with a Heart

Chapter 1

The sky was the color of a day-old bruise, heavy and swollen with the promise of rain. A perfect time for it, really—if you were the kind of person who found comfort in gloomy skies and the drumming of water on rooftops. I wasn't that kind of person. Not today. Not ever, if I was being honest.

"Blegh." The sound scraped out of my throat before I even knew I was making it, my tongue thick and useless in my mouth. I blinked against the drizzle, feeling it trace cold fingers down my face. "Where the fuck am I?" My voice came out wrong—too high, too soft. Like someone else was speaking through me. "Did I survive my overdose or something?"

I looked down at myself, at the mud-slicked fabric clinging to unfamiliar limbs. The rain made it hard to see, streaking everything into watercolor blurs, but I could make out enough. Long hair plastered to my shoulders. A pretty blouse and skirt, ruined now, the kind of clothes I'd only ever seen on mannequins and other women. Women who had their lives together. Women who weren't me.

'Oh great. I'm either in a coma or I just isekai'd into a different world.' The thought surfaced with the kind of detached calm that should have scared me. Should have, but didn't. 'Let's hope it isn't the latter, because no way is isekai actually possible. I didn't even get hit by truck-kun.'

A laugh bubbled up and died somewhere between my chest and my throat. I was too calm. Far too calm. The kind of calm that wrapped around you like a straitjacket, keeping you still while the world fell apart. Calm enough to joke about getting hit by a fictional truck. Calm enough to pretend this was just another story I was reading at three in the morning instead of something that was happening to me.

But sixty pills of ethyx don't leave room for comas. They leave room for morgues and toe tags and mothers who never stop crying.

"So," I whispered to no one, to the rain, to whatever god ran the cosmic joke that had landed me here, "I died, huh? And ended up in whatever world this is?"

The rain kept falling, indifferent to my revelation.

'I should get out of this stinky place.'

I pushed myself up from the muddy ground, my palms sinking into earth that smelled of wet wood and iron and something faintly electric, like the air before a lightning strike. Construction vehicles loomed around me like sleeping beasts—yellow excavators with jaws half-open, skeletal frameworks of unfinished buildings reaching toward the bruised sky. Plastic caution tape fluttered weakly in the wind, marking boundaries that no one was around to enforce. Not a single person in sight. Not a single soul to witness the girl who had woken up where she shouldn't have.

'Construction site. Abandoned after hours. That explains why no one found her. Found me.'

I wrapped my arms around myself, feeling the chill seep through the thin fabric of the blouse. The first thing I should do was leave. Get out of this maze of concrete and rebar and find somewhere warm. But I had no idea where here even was.

"Wait!" The word escaped before I could stop it, sharp with a desperate kind of hope. A tiny spark, foolish and bright, flickered to life in my chest. "Maybe I might have a blue window? Like those ones in those manhwas?"

The protagonist wakes up in a new body. The protagonist discovers they have cheat-level powers. The protagonist becomes overpowered as fuck and never has to feel small or weak or worthless ever again. That was how these stories went. Maybe—just maybe—this one would go that way too. Maybe this time, I'd get to have a good life. A life worth living. Hehe.

"B-blue window!" My voice cracked on the second word, pitching into something embarrassingly squeaky before it splintered entirely. The sound of it echoed briefly against the concrete and then died, swallowed by the rain.

Nothing appeared.

No translucent screen shimmering with stats. No disembodied voice congratulating me on my transmigration. No skill tree, no inventory, no quest log.

Just me and the rain and the vast, crushing weight of my disappointment.

"Ah, fuck me." The words came out flat, all the manic hope draining out of them before they even hit the air. I stood there for a moment longer, letting the rain soak through my borrowed hair, before practicality—or what was left of it—kicked in.

I reached into the pocket of the skirt. My fingers closed around three objects: a set of keys, a phone, and a wallet.

The phone was the first thing I checked. The screen lit up at my touch, bright and blessedly functional. No cracks, no water damage, battery sitting at a comfortable sixty-three percent. Small mercies. The keys were next—a standard set, one that looked like it belonged to an apartment door and another smaller one that might have been for a mailbox. 'Please let these be her house keys. Please.'

Then, the wallet.

I opened it with fingers that felt both like mine and not mine, fumbling slightly with the unfamiliar catch. Inside, a student ID stared up at me. Go-eun Yuseol. The name sat strangely in my mind, foreign and weightless, like a word I'd read a hundred times but never heard spoken aloud. She was Korean. She was also beautiful—high cheekbones, dark eyes that crinkled slightly at the corners even in the sterile photograph, a small mole beneath her right eye like a punctuation mark. The kind of face that made you look twice without knowing why.

'What were you doing here, Go-eun? Pretty girls with student IDs and convenience store jobs don't just end up unconscious in construction sites. That's not how stories work. Not even the bad ones.'

Unless, of course, this wasn't a story at all. Unless this was just random, senseless tragedy. The kind I knew all too well.

I'd accepted the fact that I isekai'd—'God, was I really using that word unironically now?'—but a part of me had been holding out hope that I'd landed somewhere familiar. A webnovel I'd binged in a single night. A manhwa I'd bookmarked and reread until the panels blurred in my vision. After all, I was a fanatic. I'd consumed so many of these stories that surely, statistically, I had to end up in one of them.

But the name Go-eun Yuseol didn't ignite a single green light in the sprawling archives of my brain.

'So I'm in a world I don't know. No foreknowledge. No cheat codes. No idea what's coming next.'

Fantastic.

The phone, at least, was familiar. Same operating system, same app icons arranged in neat little grids, same everything. Either the multiverse had a serious lack of imagination when it came to smartphone design, or Go-eun's world wasn't as different from mine as the whole "University of Magic Korea" thing might suggest. I could have called a taxi, but the thought of sitting in a stranger's car while dripping mud onto their seats and trying to explain where I needed to go—'No, sorry, I don't know the address, I just stole this body twenty minutes ago'—made my skin crawl. Instead, I pulled up the maps app, found the nearest bus station, and started walking.

My own transport. My own legs. At least those still worked the way they were supposed to.

The bus was warm in the way public transport always is—stale air and body heat and the faint chemical sweetness of someone's air freshener. I'd managed to find a seat near the back, pressed against the window where I could watch the city slide past in streaks of neon and rain. Evening. The typical time for people to go back home to their loved ones.

I watched them board and disembark in a quiet rhythm. People in suits, clutching briefcases with the exhausted determination of office workers who had given too many hours to people who didn't care. People in casual clothes, hoodies and jeans, headphones jammed in their ears like armor against the world. And then—people in armor. Actual armor. Leather and chainmail and pauldrons that gleamed dully under the bus's fluorescent lights. Some of them carried weapons strapped to their backs or hips, swords and staves and things I didn't have names for, and no one batted an eye. No one even looked twice.

'Right. Fantasy world. Got it.'

This easily helped me understand what kind of place I'd landed in. The kind where magic was real and people wore armor on public transport and the University of Magic Korea wasn't just a fancy name. It settled something in my chest, having that confirmation. At least now I knew the rules. Or, well—I knew that there were rules. Learning them would come later.

I got stares for the mud on my dress. Of course I did. A pretty girl in ruined clothes, dripping dirty water onto the bus floor, hair tangled and wild from the rain. I must have looked like I'd crawled out of a ditch. Which, technically, I had. I ignored the stares like I always did, turning my face to the window and letting my eyes unfocus until the other passengers blurred into indistinct shapes.

After I'd settled into my seat properly, I pulled out Go-eun's phone and started digging.

Barely any photos of herself. That was the first thing I noticed. Most people's phones were cluttered with selfies, mirror shots, group photos with friends. Go-eun's gallery was sparse. Screenshots of lecture notes. Reference images of landscapes and architecture. A few blurry pictures of a cat she must have encountered on the street. Only two photos of her own face—both clearly taken for practical purposes, like she'd needed to check her appearance and hadn't bothered to delete them afterward.

'Not a selfie person. Noted.'

I found her home address saved in a notes app. Convenient. I found her university portal login. Even more convenient. The University of Magic Korea. UMKR. The crest was a stylized dragon curled around a pen, which felt like the kind of symbolism someone had spent way too long designing.

I kept scrolling.

Draws a lot, based on the reference images saved on her Kinterest. Hundreds of them—character designs, color palettes, composition studies. Art was clearly more than a hobby for her. Studies a lot, too. Her calendar was a nightmare of color-coded blocks, every hour accounted for. Doesn't have powers. That one made me pause, my thumb hovering over the screen. Accepted to UMKR with no powers? 'Was she that brilliant? Or was it something else?'

Works at a convenience store. Night shifts, mostly. The kind of job you took when you needed money and didn't have many other options. Has a younger brother. Currently a vice-guild member of Ranbi.

I stopped scrolling.

'Ranbi.' The name did ring a bell. A faint one, like a note played in a distant room. I'd seen several webnovels with a guild called Ranbi. It was the kind of name that showed up often—short, memorable, the fantasy equivalent of naming your coffee shop "Brewed Awakening." It could mean anything. It could mean nothing.

What was more interesting was the brother. Go-eun's phone had his contact saved—Jae-min, with a little star emoji next to his name that felt heartbreakingly hopeful—but the last message between them was dated two years ago. Two years of silence. Two years of a name sitting in her phone like a ghost she couldn't bring herself to exorcise.

'Something happened,' I thought, staring at the screen. 'Something big enough to keep them apart for two years. Big enough that she stopped reaching out, but couldn't bring herself to delete his number.'

I locked the phone and let my head fall back against the seat.

'So. Let me get this straight.' The bus hit a bump, jostling me against the window. 'I'm not overpowered. I barely have any friends. I don't even have powers.'

A laugh bubbled up from somewhere deep in my chest—the kind of laugh that had nothing to do with humor and everything to do with despair. It escaped before I could stop it, sharp and brittle, attracting judging eyes from the bastards around me. Let them stare. Let them judge. What did I care? I was already dead.

'So I just have to accept my death in this unknown world, huh? Fuck.'

Go-eun's apartment was... less like what I expected.

I'd braced myself for something terrible—a cramped studio with peeling wallpaper and a mattress on the floor, the kind of place that screamed "starving artist" in every language. But the apartment was tidy. Clean. The floors were swept, the dishes were done, the thin curtains over the single window had been pressed so they hung in neat, even folds. Everything was in its place, like she'd been expecting company that never came.

And yet. And yet.

The furniture was sparse. A secondhand couch that had seen better decades. A coffee table with one leg slightly shorter than the others, propped up by a folded piece of cardboard. The kitchen had exactly four plates, four bowls, four cups—a matched set from a discount store, carefully maintained because replacing even one would be a luxury. The plants on the windowsill were healthy, but they were growing in repurposed containers. Old mugs. A cracked teapot. A plastic bottle cut in half.

'She's broke,' I realized, running my fingers along the edge of the kitchen counter. 'Really broke. But she's trying so hard not to look it.'

I wandered through the small space, touching things at random. The spine of a textbook. The handle of a mug. The wall of her living room, where my fingers left faint trails in the dust that wasn't there.

Because there was no dust. She'd cleaned. She'd cleaned everything, obsessively, like she was trying to scrub away something that couldn't be reached with soap and water.

'I suspected she was murdered, but there aren't any injuries on her. Nothing hinted at her taking pills or going through depression. So what brought her to that construction site?' I paused in the middle of the room, frowning at the blank wall like it owed me answers. 'It doesn't make any sense.'

"Tch." The sound escaped through my teeth, sharp with frustration. "There isn't anything here to tell me more facts about her..."

I wanted to keep searching. I wanted to tear the apartment apart until I found something—a letter, a clue, a goddamn post-it note with an explanation scribbled on it. But I was still dripping mud onto her clean floors, tracking dirt across a space she'd clearly worked so hard to keep pristine. Guilt pricked at me, unexpected and unwelcome. This wasn't my body. This wasn't my home. The least I could do was not ruin it.

The shower was small but the water pressure was decent, and the heat worked. Small blessings. I stood under the spray for longer than I needed to, letting the warmth seep into muscles that had been clenched against the cold since the moment I woke up. The mud swirled down the drain in brown spirals, taking the last physical evidence of the construction site with it.

When I finally stepped out, wrapped in a towel that was thin but clean, I caught sight of myself in the bathroom mirror. And stopped.

The ID photo hadn't done her justice. Not even close.

Go-eun Yuseol was insanely pretty. Not in the polished, artificial way of idols and actresses, but in a quieter sense. The kind of beauty that crept up on you. The kind you'd miss if you weren't looking.

I ran my hand through her hair—'my hair now, I guess'—and watched the strands slip between my fingers like black water. Silky. Soft. The kind of hair that looked effortless but probably took work to maintain. Then I touched my cheeks, and they were soft as fuck too. A mole dotted her right cheek, just below the eye, like the artist who'd designed her had placed it there as a signature. Other than that, there was nothing else to notice. No scars. No bruises. No physical history written on her skin.

'Snap out of it! Yes, she's pretty, but you're supposed to be figuring out what to do next!'

For the record, I was straight. I was. I'd spent my whole life being straight, or at least straight-adjacent enough that no one had ever questioned it. Though I did simp for women sometimes—the fictional ones, mostly, the ones in manhwas and webnovels who were drawn with impossible proportions and tragic backstories. But I'd never let myself like them. Not really. They weren't my preference. That was what I'd always told myself.

'Focus. Priorities. Survival. Go.'

I left the bathroom before I could spend any more time analyzing Go-eun's face like a creep.

Her bedroom was relatively neat, which by now I was learning was just how she existed. Everything in its place. Except for the desk. The desk was chaos. Books stacked in precarious towers, loose papers covered in handwriting that ranged from careful notes to frantic scribbles, sticky notes stuck to every available surface. A student's desk. A desperate student's desk.

I searched the drawers. Pens. Highlighters. A half-empty pack of gum. Nothing that stood out, nothing that screamed "this is why she was in a construction site"—until I found her diary.

It was a small thing, unassuming. Plain black cover, no decorations, the kind of diary you bought when you wanted to record your thoughts but didn't want anyone to know you were doing it. I opened it, feeling a brief flicker of guilt that I immediately crushed. 'She's gone. I'm her now. I need to know who I am.'

But Go-eun hadn't written much. A sentence per day. Sometimes less.

01/09/20xx, Monday

I fed a cat.

02/09/20xx, Tuesday

I watched my classmates practice magic while I sat in the corner. It hurts.

03/09/20xx, Wednesday

I watched the fireworks.

'Nothing out of the ordinary. Seems like she wasn't bullied, at least. Just... lonely.'

Then I found it. A page with more than a single sentence. A page where the ink had been smudged in places, the paper warped like water had fallen on it and dried.

18/11/20xx, Friday

I fought with my brother over something so trivial. I shouldn't have but it was for his safety. I know I am an overbearing older sister but no, it doesn't matter. He doesn't need to know. I don't want him to worry over me. After all, he is working hard and enjoying his youth like Mom wanted him to.

I read it twice. Three times. The ink was ruined in places—tears, I assumed, welling up and spilling over before she could stop them. Go-eun had cried while writing this. Had pushed her brother away on purpose, had let him think she was angry over something trivial, when really she'd been... what? Protecting him? From what?

"Go-eun," I said quietly, running my thumb over the warped paper. "I still don't know much about you."

I sighed in frustration and slid the diary back into its drawer, exactly where I'd found it. Then I let myself fall backward onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. The mattress was thin, the kind you bought when you couldn't afford better, but it was made up with clean sheets that smelled faintly of lavender detergent. Go-eun had taken care of everything she owned, even the things that weren't worth much.

I turned onto my side and faced the wall, where a calendar hung from a thumbtack. UMKR's academic calendar, covered in Go-eun's color-coded system. Days marked with X's. Days marked with stars, with hearts, with handwritten notes crammed into tiny squares. A packed schedule for a twenty-three-year-old. The kind of schedule that didn't leave room for things like rest, or friends, or figuring out why you'd woken up in a construction site.

I stared at the calendar until my eyes started to blur, and then—

'Ah, wait. She goes to UMKR, right? Maybe I can get some answers there.'

The thought sparked something. Not quite hope—I wasn't stupid enough for that—but purpose. A direction. A place to start. I'd take a break first, obviously. A week. Maybe two. Time to settle in, to learn how to be Go-eun without anyone noticing that the person inside her skin had been swapped out like a cheap manhwa plot twist.

'A good two weeks. Yeah. Hehe.'

I rolled onto my back again, letting my newly long hair fan out across the pillow. It was strange, the weight of it. Strange and warm and kind of annoying, actually.

'Should I cut it? I can't really maintain long hair.' My mind slipped back into humor like it was a comfortable coat. Calm. Joking. The way it always did during situations that overwhelmed me. I knew I was doing it. Knew it was a defense mechanism, a way of keeping the panic at arm's length. Knew it wasn't healthy. Knew it wasn't sustainable.

But I couldn't do anything about it. I never could.

Outside, the rain kept falling. Inside, I closed a stranger's eyes and tried not to think about sixty pills, about morgues and toe tags, about all the things I'd left behind in a world I'd never see again.

That's when a knock arrived at the door.

At damn midnight.