

# Decay Hunter

**DECAY**

**HUNTER**

# Chapter 1

The wind was ripe with the stench of blood—but whether it wafted up from another 'bounty of the sea' dragged up onto the rickety Wharf, or the rotting corpse left by a poor fool's debts catching up to them—no one seemed to care. That was because no one stopped to look.

Violence was natural, and the stench of it more so. A resident of Nagwon, the so-called Riotbanks, could ignore it, smiling, laughing, arguing—living as they were. And visitors would throw up.

It was a matter of what a person could stomach.

"I had to..."

A young boy stood over a fresh corpse, muttering those words repeatedly as if to convince himself of their truth; seeming all but ignorant to the dogs the putrid stench had attracted. The strays—one limping and another so thin that its bones had imprinted onto its skin—watched the boy and the corpse, but didn't dare to move closer.

"Didn't I have to..?" The boy asked the darkness, and the shadows of the alley that shielded him seemed to writhe in response.

But it was not a response that he could hear. He could not hear. But he could sense.

The malnourished boy looked to the dogs, the stubs of his ears twitching in agitation as if they had not been trimmed down for the sake of his humanity, as if they could still hear as they once did. He felt anger, sudden and consuming, directed at the dogs whose ears resembled his birth defect, the defect that had left him in the trash for an alley sweeper to find.

Was it the dogs, who cursed him with disgusting features? Cursing him to look like them out of spite for his father, who was paid to shoot strays and clean the streets?

Did the dogs make his father hate him? Was it the dogs who had made his father hurt him?

"No...dad hated monsters. So he hated me..." The boy looked to the dogs, who ran on sight, the sounds of their yelping echoing across the narrow walls and registering in his ears as the bearest of whispers.

The boy stared at the empty alley's end, at a trashcan left spilled and oozing rotten fish and maggots, and smiled.

His gaze fell on the gaping mouth of his victim, at the teeth that were yellowed and crooked from the addictions that the man had maintained at the cost of everything else.

"Monsters should die, so die, you worthless monster..!" He could almost hear those lips screaming at him, swinging a bottle at his head. The shards that had scattered around him as he ran out the door—they had cut his feet, his hands, his face.

But the pain he endured for so long had been repaid.

Someone had helped him. And now the real monster was dead at his feet.

It was only when he felt the warmth of the blood under his bare feet that he realized that he was left all alone; alone in a world that hated him. That fact hurt him, more than the kicks and punches, more than the cuts.

"D-dad..? I didn't mean it...get up...wake up..."

[This is what you desired. ] A string of words took to the air, the boy's own breath feeding the attempt of the shadows to communicate without a voice to carry that burden. It was only lucky that the poor boy knew how to read the letters that appeared in front of his face.

"...I didn't, I didn't..! I didn't want him dead...!! I..I don't want to be alone...I don't want to be a monster—"

[You, child, are no monster. You are a boy. A lucky boy...that you found me, is lucky.] The letters dragged another breath from his lungs, making him cough into his hand, his own blood mixing with the evidence of his crime. For a moment, he stared at his hand, the muscle writhing and festering with the growth of claws straight from the bone of his knuckles, jutting out in a way that made the boy's stomach turn.

Monsters had claws. Monsters were unnatural. They deserved no kindness, no friendship, no love.

Matron Clara had said so, so it was the truth.

He was a monster who was dangerous, violent, and hideous; like the bounties dredged from the sea and chopped up for profit, like the creatures that his favorite Hunter protected humanity from.

It was the kind of killing that was celebrated. Revered.

The boy had once dreamed of a future, before he had given up on the notion. It was a common dream, being a hunter. Every hopeless kid at the orphanage had claimed they'd be the next Lucius Veinclair, or Hojo Tatsuya; bragging that they'd be legendary, important, *loved*.

He had been blinded by dreams when a father showed up, claiming to want him back.

He hadn't known yet that dreams weren't for boys like him. Only humans could dream, only human boys could become hunters.

Hunters protect the weak.

Monsters could only kill, they can't protect.

He was a monster.

A monster who had killed his father.

Because he had to. Because he was promised help, because now, he could, no he would-

[Survive. I'll help you...as I promised. All you must do is let me.]

Tears hit the cement, indistinguishable from the rain that marred the streets in puddles of grime, the morning rush unhindered by the trail of crimson that seeped through the cracks and splashed under ignorant soles and rusted tires.

In that moment of sorrow, the boy wanted to beg and plead someone, anyone, to help save his father. But that moment slipped away when he felt eyes on him, bearing witness to his crime.

"Darn...that's not coming off..." A tall man tapped his heel on the edge of the sidewalk, his gaze flicking to the tint of red that swirled under the soles of his dress shoes, then back up to the source of the stench.

For a moment, brown eyes met cloudy blues from across the road, the angry traffic allowing only glimpses of the small figure that stumbled off into the maze of rusted pipes and haphazardly strewn junk.

It was a child, who had left a corpse in that alley.

So Hajoon looked away.

He knew that the law was not kind, nor was any militia dispatched to the scene if he were to report the incident. In fact, reporting it would only incriminate him, and he had no intention of spending the rest of his short life in a jail cell.

*The alley sweeps will get to it eventually...or the dogs will. I don't know which is worse.*

He folded his umbrella, watching the excess water cascade into the cracks of the tiled sidewalk and down a malformed drain a foot away. Even as the raindrops clouded his glasses and eventually obscured his vision of that tainted water, he just couldn't shake the stench that pricked at his mind through his nostrils.

*That kid...was it an abuse case? Terrible parenting isn't odd around here, but killing your own family...? A kid won't be able to deal with that kind of mental burden...*

"Hey..! Don't block the street!" An older woman pushed past Hajoon, giving an annoyed look as he stepped back, letting the gathering crowds go ahead of him as he stood by the barely visible bus stop sign. It was early morning, of course people were antsy to get to whatever work that kept their lives afloat, no one had the time for distractions.

Going to work and slaving away, that was his fate too. It didn't matter what he thought about tyrannical managers and his lack of sleep, he couldn't exactly stop being an office worker over petty complaints like that; not when the alternatives would have him dropping dead in some alley.

There really wasn't much a man could do when missing a payment would have sharks biting at his heel. He was lucky that they'd only left a letter this morning, wedged between his apartment door and the mossy cement wall. It was only a polite reminder—until he'd have to endure a rain of fists not too dissimilar to the rain that pelted him now—if he failed to pay the installment by the end of the month.

When he inevitably failed to procure the money within the next two weeks, would he end up like that corpse? Ignored, unnoticed as his pathetic little life got thrown in with the trash?

He hoped so. There were worse fates for fools indebted to the local mafia. If you couldn't pay, they always had ways to make back the losses. Organs were worth quite a lot in both legal and underground markets.

*Desecrating the dead isn't wrong if it makes quick money. That's the reason they fund alley sweepers, better to take the working organs of corpses than let the dogs eat it.*

Hajoon couldn't help staring at the slumped figure across the road, the lifeless body sagged against the narrow space between a noodle shop and a butcher's place that typically had more squid and fish than any real meat.

*The stench of fish would obscure the stench of a rotting corpse. No one would find it casually, not if they weren't looking for it.*

It was a bit too convenient.

*Ah, I'm jumping the gun again. I don't know anything. But if that wasn't the kid's father at all, then the options left are robbery, or just plain murder...*

*...Did that man piss off the Jeoksa? Would the Red Snakes use a child for their dirty work..?*

*Is that why they fund the orphanage by the old factory? Exploiting children..? I wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt, but what can I expect from scum really?*

"Don't worry beyond your means..." He muttered to himself as he stepped in line for the bus; which groaned to a stop along the railway tracks that webbed across the main streets. Cutting a path straight from one end of Nagwon to the other, it provided the only viable transport into the guarded city that had long decided that the Riotbankers were scum.

Scum, the definition of impurities drifting along on their pure waters. They had cleaned up a few times over the years, so the sea still stank of blood.

*Apparently my grandfather was lost during one, but he was a soldier.*

*I don't feel bad for him.*

Hajoon gripped his briefcase as the crowd shifted around him, backing away as the great hunk of metal blasted a cloud of steam and exhaust onto any poor fool within a five foot radius.

He had thought that he had gotten the knack of standing just far enough away to avoid the heat without being left behind by the fast moving bus and the irritable drivers that helmed them, but he was wrong. As per usual, he was seeing through a fog until he sat down and the heated interior thawed his glasses.

He knew that the warmth pumping in through the vent under his seat was just a byproduct of the steam engine running this miniature model of a train, but he was grateful nevertheless.

He was never made for the cold, and the changing of the seasons had him dreading the fevers that were to come.

*Late autumn isn't great for air quality either, it's not like dead trees can clean up the smog...*

*Oh well, at least the view isn't terrible...*

Hajoon stared out of the window as the grime and stench of fish slowly drifted into the distance, the puffs of smoke from the rumbling bus giving way to the sparkling sea and the crowded horizon of a port city.

It was a vision of utopia, and as such, it was rotten to its roots.

Holding the title of unofficial capital to the Eastern fort, Jeokjo Port's international acclaim was held up on the shoulders of the slums that it generated like sewage waste. They had once tried to clean their messes, but eventually settled on using the labor of the lesser men born from the wastes.



It was why a free bus like this existed, carting the workforce into the city in the morning, then kicking them back into the outskirts of livable land along where the Nakdong River spilled into the sea.

A train system did exist, connecting Jeokjo to the northern cities that fell under Nawian rule, as well as the mainland of Nawia and Buxiu beyond them, but Hajoon wasn't legally permitted to travel so far even if he did manage to secure the ticket funds. It would take several permits and a visa to do so, but a childish dream of seeing the world wasn't worth all of that.

Simply put, he had the knowledge to jump the legal loopholes, but not the money.

All he could do was curse his father for hopping on a boat when they broadcasted this place as a utopia of opportunity around half a century ago. If he hadn't landed in the Eastern Fort as a foreign labourer, Hajoon could have happily ceased to exist.

'In the dying light of the calamity period that reduced thriving old world cities to rubble and ruin, leaving monster infested dungeons in their place, the Forts were heralded as a beacon of hope and a defense against the dangers outside of their ever-expanding borders.'

'The last defense against ruin and corruption'

That was what he remembered from his highschool History books.

Factual or not, It really was the greatest sales pitch of the century, having caused the largest immigration seen in the eastern belt directed towards the island nations of the then newly established Eastern Fort. Officially registered as Redtide Port on the world map, Jeokjo Port was a central trade hub off the coast of the Akai Sea, the location of which allowed the Eastern Fort to honor its trade alliances with the Northern and Western Forts.

The Northern Fort, consisting of Nawia and its vessels, was a leading manufacturer of steel and machinery; and as such, required large quantities of raw material, which the Eastern Fort helped provide and import due to its access to safer, less volatile oceans.

The Western Fort partnered in that import as well as export, having the largest and most efficient fleet of freighter ships in the world. Being the combined alliance of USUN—united in states, united in nations—the military might of Amarcia and Albion kept the cargo safe from both sea behemoths as well as pirates.

The Eastern Fort was a strategic location for trade when considering the dangers of the unknown ocean depths, as it was a flock of islands situated between the route from East Amarcia to west Nawia. The Eastern fort consisted of Hwanryeo, Ashihara, and the Insulinde archipelago, or what was left of it after the last dungeon sweep and consequent annexation.

Annexation and trade alliances were the reason for the northern and western presence in the heart of Jeokjo. It wasn't so strange to see inner city dwellers walking around sporting hair the color of ash, or eyes as blue as the sea. It was a simple fact that Expats earned citizenship easily, they deserve it more than Hajoon did.

Why? Because their nations funded defense forces for any vassal state, which included Hwanryeo, the fallen country he was born to.

He failed to fight for his state. He was too sick, so he failed as a man.

It was his birthright to be treated as a lesser man.

He was glad that his grandmother was no longer around to tell him those words.

*She would be glad to know that I also failed at the career in law that I used to argue against her.*

"—Endorsed by the Thunder Dragon himself..! For only 20pax a pack, you dear sir can have the electric energy to slay your paperwork like Hojo-sama fells behemoths with a shrug of his wrist!" The theatrical words coming from Hajoon's left caught his attention, if only due to the mention of a name he knew against his will. He turned his head to catch a salesman flaunting a pack of low quality instant coffee at the face of a pudgy man, whose receding hairline wasn't helped by the stupid look of delusion on his face.

The man thought himself a hero on par with Hojo Tatsuya, top hunter and director of the Hunter Tower, so he paid the money in full.

It was a common sight on buses, with several salesmen of various overpriced products cycling through during Hajoon's morning commute alone. Of course, the man that was in front of him now was especially desperate, as the bus was approaching one of the bridges that separated Jeokjo from the slums of Nagwon.

If he were to cross while selling products on a bus, an illegal activity to which no permit existed, arrest would be the least of his concerns.

"You, Handsome Sir, look like the respectable sort! I'm sure an Intelligent man like you can appreciate the value of Liquid Thunder! Only 20pax a pack, but for a regular like you I'll make it 15!"

Hajoon smiled, taking the offered pack of the caffeinated drink, dropping a bronze coin into the outstretched hand.

"This is only 5pax..." The salesman's smile dropped slowly as his frown lines became more prominent, but Hajoon simply smiled as he stabbed a straw into one of three containers.

"Yes, it is." He said as he took a sip of the strong coffee and energy drink mixture, enjoying the small sting it left on his tongue.

"...Hey. You bastard, what is this..?! Pay the full price or don't buy it! Do you get it?? I'll report you—"

"It's overpriced." Hajoong interrupted the salesman, who had started to sweat as he noticed the attention he was drawing, his eyes darting to the bridge coming into view through the maze of telephone wires and haphazard architecture.

"Do you really want to be arguing with me when we stop at the bridge? Don't you know that this counts under the fraudulent sales punishment act? Would you risk your life for a few extra coins?"

He didn't get an answer, only a glare as the man rushed to the doors that opened at the last stop before the bridge, and the last chance to avoid jail time. Hajoong's jaw clenched as he caught the last mumbled words of goodbye from the man.

"Fucking Roach....huh? What a flattering nickname..." Hajoong sighed, leaning back into his seat as he used the strong coffee to alleviate the side effects of his habitual insomnia. But he was soon forced to stuff his purchase into his briefcase, stiffening as two bridge guards climbed aboard the bus with their rifles held at their sides.

"Worker ID, now." They went straight for the balding man, whose unkempt attire signaled him as a lower rung labourer. He hadn't managed to hide the overpriced drink in his hands, and it tumbled to the ground, a few excess droplets splattering on the ash haired guard's boot.

"...Disgusting." The foreign words spelled doom for the fumbling man who couldn't understand them, the guard's eyes dark under the shadow of his peaked cap.

Hajoong looked away as he was slapped then dragged off, leaving the other guard to harass each passenger extensively, one by one. He was forced to look into those cold blue eyes when it came to be his turn, so he chose to smile, as politely as he could manage.

"Good day sir."

The guard seemed surprised, his eyebrows darting up before he smiled back in false respect.

"Well now, you're educated are you? You're far too fluent for the slums, got a cushy job somewhere eh?" He extended a hand, into which Hajoong placed his worker Identification card. He inspected the card, pinching it between two fingers as if it was trash he picked up off the street.

“GenCure? How did *you* get a job *there*?” The guard scoffed, pocketing the small card and staring at Hajoon, who only waited patiently to have it returned. The guard thought the card to be fabricated on the basis that GenCure Pharmaceuticals was too high class and influential of a company for him to be an employee of. It had a choke hold on the lucrative medical field of the East after all, rivalling the figurehead government of Hwanryeo in influence.

*But a scam company needs scammers to fill the roles. How else would they convince the masses to buy overpriced cough drops?*

“Merit, sir.” Hajoon responded, keeping steady eye contact with the pale blues that glared at him. “And a bit of luck of course, haha...” He chuckled to deprecate himself, which he had noticed that guards and officers liked to see. It gave them an ego boost, and put them in a better mood for negotiation.

“Lucky guy huh?” The man laughed as well as he glanced at Hajoon’s work bag. “Do you have anything in there? For *luck*..?”

*Hah...Do I look like I have money to bribe you, bastard?*

“Haha...if I kept a mystical talisman at the bottom of this for luck, I don’t suppose you’d be interested?” Hajoon laughed awkwardly, unbuckling the cheap leather bag and staring at the contents, at the top of which were the coffee packs he’d hid before.

“Talisman? I’ve no interest in pagan fantasies!” The guard snorted, his laugh making the others who sat nearby flinch.

“Oh, well you never know when you need a mystical tissue when it’s this cold out..!” Hajoon joked, keeping the nervous smile plastered on his face because he knew well enough that a bootlicker was better off than the dead. Besides, he didn’t have to try too hard if he looked nonthreatening, kind, and somewhat unassuming. Being a doormat by default had its benefits, benefits proven by the relaxed guard who only laughed at him.

“Haha..! What a funny roach! Hm...I’m parched from laughing...” The guard covered his grin with a hand as he eyed the coffee in Hajoon’s bag.

*Ugh. Stealing cheap shit from the poor? Really?*

“Please drink this, sir.” He smiled as he stood up and offered the Nawian soldier the unopened packs of coffee with both hands, bowing habitually. Making coffee for his betters was his job after all, even if he had nearly two years of seniority over the newest hires.

Hajoon didn’t straighten up from the bow until the guard walked off with the coffee he’d extorted, tossing Hajoon’s Identification card to him over his shoulder. He didn’t manage to catch it midair, so he stared at the card that was left on the dirty floor for a moment.

With a few less passengers than before, the bus rumbled back into motion, trudging past the line of security that seemed comically extensive on a random weekday morning. Hajoon tucked his ID back into his shirt pocket as he watched the men in black uniforms milling about in the distance before disappearing from sight as the bus took a turn into the dense architecture of Jeokjo.

*Hah...that didn't feel like the usual random inspection...*

*But it's fine, let's move on. I lost my breakfast to that bastard but that was all I lost. Thinking about it will only make my head hurt. It's not my place to ask questions.*

As they say, a freshwater fish couldn't survive in the ocean. Either they find the flow of the current and adapt, or they drown.

Of course, the fish will slowly die in the acidic waters, but the choice was between prolonged death or an instant one.

He had to remind himself of that as he stepped out into the well-maintained streets of the business sector, falling into step behind the morning commuters that would eventually fill up the towering building that blotted out the sky. It was all very uniform and clear cut; designs made to optimize space above all else, but the large building where his cubicle was waiting for him looked as if it was dropped there from a different time. The ground floors looked like an asylum, while the glassy extensions to its height looked wildly out of place.

Hajoon filed in behind the mindless lines of workers, and inserted his Worker ID into the security gates before following the line to the elevator.

He was late. But at least he was here.

"Oh..! Good morning Mr. Park!" A cheery voice greeted Hajoon as he took his place at his desk, startling him out of his thoughts. Looking up at his co-worker—who's bright smile didn't match the look in her eyes—he couldn't help the childish wish to turn invisible.

"Ah, good morning Ms. Lee..."

It never worked in his childhood, but at least he wouldn't stumble out of this interaction with a black eye. Hopefully.

"You were a bit late...did something happen?"

"No, not at all. Don't worry about it." He smiled, before focusing back on the work his lazy teammates had dropped off for him. Being a doormat had its advantages, but cutting back on workload wasn't one of them.

Having the looks of an actress was the proven method to curb incompetence. By the laws of pretty privilege, Lee Hyejin, his desk mate to the left, had a much easier time.

*Haahh...well I'm no fair maiden, better get to work.*

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Rows upon rows of glass windows, ten, twenty, forty floors down, a long way to fall before he would reach the cement below. It was a good thing that he wasn't scared of heights, because he could enjoy the view for what it was, busy and suffocating, but dazzling all the same.

The sea was dyed with the red of the setting sun, its waning light filtering through the city skyline to prove its namesake Jeokjo, or Redtide as it framed the largest of the spires in a snapshot of red and gold. It was the Hunter's tower, one of the many headquarters under the Hunters Association, but this particular one was the biggest and most grand in Hwanryeo. This particular branch worked closely with the Militia, and had strong ties to both the USUN and Ashihara, much like the city itself.

But unfortunately for fans of the celebrity status Hunters, storming the building would only yield clerks and military affiliated police officers. It doubled as the Jeokjo police department after all.

"Hey, Hajoon-ssi?"

"What?"

"Ah—I mean, do you need something Hyejin-ssi?" Hajoon switched to formality as he glanced over at his coworker who sat on a bench further from the ledge, the smoke from her cigarette swirling with the wind to leave the break area to reek of tobacco.

"Don't try jumping, it's no fun without a rope to catch you."

"...Do you mean bungee jumping?" He laughed a bit awkwardly, taking a step back from the safety railing to meet Lee Hyejin's cold gaze. "Have you...gone bungee jumping before?"

Lee Hyejin laughed, her cheery self falling back into place as she snuffed her cigarette on an ashtray built into the bench. "I have, actually! The one in Inje was amazing to say the least, did you know it was the highest in the country before the calamity period carved the Veincliff gorge?"

*Of course I know. It's not the fun fact you think it is, Lee Hyejin.*

"Inje...huh, you went that far north?" Hajoon asked, crossing his arms to find some warmth as an icy wind blasted his face.

For a moment, Lee Hyejin looked annoyed by Hajoon's lack of enthusiasm, but simply chuckled, deciding to keep decorum. "It's not as dangerous up there as they say— the fear mongering is just to scare off unprepared tourists."

*What are you then?* He thought with an internal scoff.

"They...you mean the Hunters Association. Is it false to say the north is dangerous? They're right aren't they? The Seol dungeon is still there, they never managed to destroy it, or else the news of clearing an S rank historic dungeon would be all you'd hear about on the news-" Hajoon's words trailed off, finding his words had drawn attention to their corner of the break area. It was a moderately large space at the near top of the headquarter building of GenCure Pharmaceuticals, but that didn't stop gossip hungry ears from overhearing.

He glanced away from the disapproving stares of the senior crowd, a group of rich men and women who sat in the sheltered seating area with a large glass window separating them from him. He could see a woman with greying hair and a gaudy butterfly hairpin reach over to close the blinds, making him scoff.

"Personally, I think it's not a question of whether they can destroy it, but if they should!"

*Here comes the fanboy...*

Hajoon tried to hold back an exasperated sigh as an idiot inserted himself into the conversation, looking rather ridiculous in the large blue scarf he'd wrapped around himself to stave off the cold winds.

"Obviously, even just Hojo-sama can obliterate that old dungeon...! He's the strongest S rank around!! They were just...being stingy with the new ranking you know...no way he lost to western Hunters.." He continued, muttering somewhat spitefully.

Ando Natsuki was a die hard fan of the Hunter Tower's Director, and got too worked up over pointless things. If he could just channel that same energy into his work, Hajoon wouldn't have to pick up his slack so often.

"Haha...don't take the articles seriously, they must have gotten some *gifts* from the western branch." Hajoon laughed to lighten the mood, watching as Ando took the bait almost immediately.

"Yeah...! Maybe I shouldn't curse them yet haha..."

"Haha...curse, huh? Just a verbal one wouldn't have worked on them anyway, they're used to those. Maybe look into some ritual curses? There's easy ones that can give them all bad luck for a month or two."

"Wait...seriously..? Whoa...so it's not just lies scam fortune tellers make up?"

"Haha...you just need to have the eye to tell the scams from the real deal!" Hajoong smiled at the gullible Ando, before leaning back against the railing to stare out at the horizon where metal behemoths were docked at port. From here, the other side of the river was visible, away from the city's brilliance, where the slums of Nagwon clung to the river bed for dear life.

He had grown up in the easternmost edge of the Riotbanks, the last viable pieces of land before the cliffs of the Busan dungeon began. After his father had left them, it was the closest to Jeokjo that his mother could afford to move to. The move south was for safety and opportunity, she had said, but it wasn't much better than his hometown. He would have preferred to stay, if only it still existed.

At least the north wasn't shrouded in constant rain and fog.

*Ah? Fog? Why does it look...odd?*

Hajoong's eyes followed the fog as it rolled over the tops of buildings, then over the congested roads, seeming to writhe and materialize where it wasn't previously. The more he looked for it, the more he saw of it.

It was strange.

He simply laughed along with Ando's mosquito-like droning as he watched the fog roll across Nagwon, smothering the claustrophobic slums, then Mulgwi Wharf, where his apartment was.

Something about it made his head sting with pain, and his eyes were forced to look away.

"Why is it so foggy..? Are we getting another typhoon?" Hajoong muttered, getting a quizzical glance from Ando.

"Eh? What fog?"

"It's...uh, down there..."

"Is it..? Sorry I can't find it haha..!" Ando laughed apologetically after staring intently at what Hajoong seemed to be looking at.

*...What? Huh...?*

*Ugh, this is giving me a headache.*

"Haha..don't worry about it then."



Lee Hyejin was watching as the two men laughed it off, waiting for Ando to get back to the point, but he never did.

"So...Mr. Ando? You said something about the Hunter's leaving the Seol Dungeon unresolved on...purpose?" She interjected, her lead in being in English to give herself credibility, as was the custom of office etiquette when most of upper management swore they were native speakers of the language even if they struggled with basic grammar.

"Oh..! That..? Ah...haha, you make it sound like a bad thing Ms. Lee!"

"Oh you know I didn't mean it like that!" Lee Hyejin smiled at Ando as she stood up as well, one hand holding her skirt steady as a stinging cold wind swept through the rooftop.

Ando was less graceful, clutching at the scarf that threatened to get swept away.

"The Hunters are heroes, who would bad mouth them?" She glanced at Hajoon pointedly as she said this, unbothered as her long dark hair was swept like a flag in the wind.

She stared at the silent man, then looked back at Ando. Though it was odd that Hajoon was covering his nose with his sleeve, it wasn't as if he would appreciate it if she showed concern.

That was the line drawn, and she couldn't cross it anymore. No number of heartfelt apologies made the petty bastard budge, so she had given up.

"Right...so I was just saying how useful the mineral mining is in the dungeons. The Seol Dungeon is basically an endless power source, you know what I mean? Every normal mine ran out years ago, right, so I think it's fine to keep Veinclair mines running! Besides, It's always a treat to see Hojo-sama slay the monsters in there haha!" Ando tried to explain his stance while fighting against the winds for custody of his oversized scarf.

"Well, Mr. Ando, that's a very practical stance! We would be hard pressed to power even basic necessities without the mines...although there are safety concerns like Mr. Park said, I think the hunters have no problem handling it." Lee Hyejin smiled, her rosy lips curving upwards, making it hard for Ando not to smile as well.

"Exactly! The gain is much bigger than the cost. Besides, there haven't been casualties in years because of the patrol program Hojo-sama leads..! They're actually holding a live broadcast event soon! They promised to show every detail of the dungeon sweep next month..!" Ando continued on, forgetting his nerves at the slight approval from Lee Hyejin.

"Gahh..! I really wish they would schedule it on a weekend, or else I'll have to take the day or even the week off work...geh, I mean-" He shut his mouth, expecting a glare from Lee Hyejin but was surprised to see her smiling.

"Hojo Tatsuya is a very competent leader, really, and he's the strongest we have. I understand wanting to see him in action!"

"Haha...er..right..! Our Thunder Dragon is the strongest- " His awkward laugh was cut short as he noticed a droplet of red hit the ground next to his shoe. Both Ando and Lee Hyejin paused, staring at the blotch of red, then looked back up at the source as their smiles fell.

"Sorry..." Hajoon muttered, his voice muffled as his sleeve became soaked in blood.

"Are you okay..? Is it the anemia?" Ando asked, stepping beside Hajoon to grip his shoulder in support.

"Haha, I don't have anemia...who told you that?" Hajoon laughed, wincing before he shrugged Ando off and walked off without ceremony. He only stopped by the door to give a slight bow, following simple etiquette before the pain made him forget to maintain his image in the eyes of his coworkers.

*Fuck. It hurts to breathe.*

Stumbling into a washroom and watching the sink below him tint red, Hajoon found it exceptionally hard to focus. It was painful, every breath feeling like claws squeezing his heart and lungs into submission.

It was painful. Living was always painful for a bastard like him.

His glasses lay discarded on the counter as he gripped the edge of the sink, rivulets of blood flooded from his nose while every cough spat more red into the tainted porcelain. He was sickly, sure, but this was too much.

Hajoon's eyes glared at the blurry reflection of his face in the mirror, the blob of features flickering into focus as the lights above him did the same. A sharp stab of pain erupted through his chest as the lights finally cut, and he could suddenly see the silver speckled eyes that stared back at him.

They belonged to his face, those cursed eyes that functioned like a monster's eyes rather than a humans. A human couldn't see in the pitch darkness, but he could.

But he wasn't a monster.

His fathers genes didn't make him a monster. He wanted to believe that.

He wished he couldn't see the twisted grin on his face, a grin that revealed unnatural canines blended into his human teeth, a grin that he had no control over.

[The game begins anew, you saw it, didn't you?] That grin spoke, dragging Hajoon's breath from his lungs to feed its growling voice. It wasn't a voice he heard with his ears, but he heard it.

Silent moments passed in the darkness, Hajoon staring into the mirror that slowly fogged with his own breath.

*I've lost it. I've lost my mind. Wow, haha! I knew it would happen eventually, but isn't it too soon to go crazy from overworking?*

[No, fool, I am real. You know this, I have always been here, right here.] The voice used Hajoon's hand to poke at his chest, underneath which his heart was struggling to keep beating.

*Hahaha...ha! I always knew I'd have to check myself into an asylum one day...hahaha..!*

[No! Listen-]

*No.*

[...What? Was? That?]

*NO.*

[Well. You refuse to listen. Then I will not bother with consent. Just know this- ]

Hajoon's efforts to drown the voice out was halted as he watched words being drawn onto the fogged mirror.

He froze in place, having no choice but to acknowledge them.

[Allow me control, and you shall survive.]

# Chapter 2

The first snow of the year had dropped from the sky without notice, blanketing the streets in a layer of white as Hajoon waited for his ride back to the slums to arrive. The old rust bucket was late by two hours—but that wasn't out of the ordinary; not when the weather was as fickle as upper management and their tendencies to hire and fire on a whim. Similar to a whimsical manager, the bus system was unpredictable, and blaming its incompetence would be heresy.

The more reasonable action was to assume that the older bus engines had frozen with the sudden drop in temperature—and like a domino effect, brought the entire system grinding to a halt. Jeokjo was never designed for cold winters, what with the perpetual rain and wind that came as a product of proximity to the stormy Busan Dungeon; so the buses that had run its public transport lines since its conception suffered for it. It didn't help that funding had been whittled away at by leeches in both government and militia, until only drivers from the Riotbanks accepted the measly pay handed out in return for a nearly 24 hour service.

Hajoon could make the educated guess that the drivers who were stuck heating those engines in the cold would be inclined to take as many 'tea' breaks as possible.

It was good business for tea houses, it wouldn't be surprising if the home brewed rice wine stocks would be drunk dry by the end of the night.

By the bias of experience, Hajoon would consider it a miracle if the buses showed up at all.

Then again, he would prefer no miracles tonight. He had experienced enough of the supernatural for one day, and didn't need to question his sanity any more than he did on a regular basis.

Was it a bad omen that his heart was acting up again, or was it just rebound from working his weak body ragged? He couldn't afford anything better than dubious painkillers, so he settled on blaming bad omens. His decision wasn't baseless, as his mother had warned him of his supposed terrible luck this year, and every other year before that. She took it far more seriously than he did, introducing spirit mediums, fortune tellers, shamans, a monk, and even a priest to solve the problem that was his by birthright.

He had thrown away the contact of the most recent scammer, but maybe he shouldn't have..?

*I wonder if that old bat does exorcisms too...? I could use a good slap of spiritual salt or whatever they call it...*

"Are you alright Hajoon-ssi?" Lee Hyejin interrupted his peace with obvious questions, as she often does.

"...Yeah."

"But you're shaking..."

"It's cold." He said, crossing his arms to stop the trembling for a moment as he looked out at the silhouettes of people within the warmth of a café that stood directly across from the bus stop. Many of the haughty employees from GenCure and surrounding offices had retreated into that orange glow in the darkness once they found no punctual bus awaiting them, opting to drink a cup of coffee rather than wait outside with the unlucky few who were turned away at the door.

They were at capacity, or so they said.

He wasn't about to find another café and potentially miss the only bus back, so he was left shivering in his flea market trenchcoat. The poor quality fabric did a lukewarm job at staving off the biting winds and the wet snowflakes that melted upon contact, but he wasn't doing as terribly as Lee Hyejin suggested. In fact, he was doing far better than the jittering Ando, who was walking in place and rubbing his hands in a dance Hajoon could only describe as reminiscent of a spooked chicken.

"Ack..! It's freezing..! Why'd there have to be a power outage on our floor?? We could have been drinking coffee all warm and toasty if we just got here earlier..." Ando whined, his teeth clattering in a way that made it almost impossible to take him seriously.

*That is true. We had to wander around in the dark to find a working elevator door...And the water stopped too.*

*...Cleaning the blood was a hassle.*

Suddenly a dark pair of eyes were right in front of Hajoon, spooking him into letting a huff of breath that fanned onto his own face, fogging his glasses.

"Hey, Mr. Park. It doesn't make sense for it to go out for just us, right? How does that even happen?" Ando looked serious for a moment, which was cause for concern considering the bumbling buffoon was inept at reading the room in most cases.

"I'm...not sure. But you're right, it...doesn't make sense." Hajoon glanced away, deciding to focus on warming his own cold hands rather than think about his breakdown in the washroom. It wasn't as if Ando would suddenly show his detective prowess and connect Hajoon to the scene of the crime.

Not that it made any logical sense to blame him for a power outage.

"Right! Don't you think it was an attack? You know...like a hacker trying to get information..."

Hajoon let out a huff of relief at Ando's outlandish speculations, putting his own paranoia to rest. In fact, he felt compelled to try and believe Ando this time, because he'd rather an unknown hacker be the culprit rather than himself and his 'condition'.

"That's...possible, I suppose."

"Yeah...like hacking..! While we were all busy getting the power back on, the hacker could have snuck in and stolen important files..!"

*Why in the world would a hacker sneak...in...?*

*Besides, all they'll find in there are advertisement proposals and deals made with shitty tabloid companies.*

"Haha..! You might be underestimating the security of GenCure a little, Ando-ssi." Lee Hyejin interjected, her smile twitching at the corner with what Hajoon could only assume as annoyance. But her change from Mr. to the honorific of ssi contrasted with that idea, because she was trying to be casual to some degree.

It was an awkward thing, deciding between formal and casual speech when speaking to a man from Ashihara, the former Rising Sun Empire. In the past, it would have been expected of Hwanrian citizens to respect such a man by speaking the imperial language; but gone were the days of Ashiharan language enforcement on the Eastern Fort.

The replacement was English, but the execution was terrible to the point that most stuck to the native language of the Hwanrian peninsula.

"Oh..! Yeah, I didn't mean that uh...sorry um...L-Lee Hyejin-ssi."

Hajoon glanced at the shivering Ando, whose shoulder bumped into his as he shuffled away from Lee Hyejin. The brown haired man was a coward when it came to her, which was reassuring in a way.

Accidentally insulting a more influential man than Ando Natsuki would be a death flag waiting to be found stabbed in the dirt in front of your door. Sometimes the militia made a show of it, falsifying records to justify what would become of you, sometimes they didn't bother to.

It was easier to just pay the Jeoksa to do their dirty work. Any mafia man would bend the knee for money.

Hajoon assumed that even Lee Hyejin should know this to some extent, and was trying to avoid offending Ando, otherwise she would have referred to Ando by first name like she does for him. Or perhaps her life was perfect and easy, and they simply lived in different worlds altogether.

She wasn't that different from the upper class citizens, the nature to exploit her lessers was the same.

Hajoon brought his hands to his mouth, blowing warm air into the long fingers that had lost circulation at the tips. He watched the shadows in the distance that were lit by faint streetlights that speckled the cold and dark streets of a city in slumber, unprepared for the early snow and the partial storm it had brought with it. A few of the people darting about held shields of umbrellas against the onslaught of snow, but it was no use in this wind; Hajoon knew that well enough because he had tried and failed.

*I'll get sick at this rate...*

He looked up, closing his eyes as the flakes of snow landed on his glasses, then melted away. To conserve electrical supply, the buildings that blotted out the sky were as dark as they were tall, and the sky starless and bleak beyond them. He could barely see that sight for himself, because the glasses he wore made him all but blind during the night, like a normal human would be.

He could see everything in that darkness, if he took them off. But he didn't.

Being questioned by others, it was one of the things he hated the most. He would rather suffer in silence.

*I wasn't born normal, I'm not a full human. But at least I could act normal...but what about now? I'm seeing things? Hearing things? They always said I was cursed, but this isn't just neighborhood gossip anymore...it's bordering on mental illness now huh?*

*I can't afford a psychiatrist. Maybe it's time to consult a supernaturally gifted scammer like mom said?*

*What would they even say? That my energies are twisted up, and that I need to pay 50pax for a lucky talisman? What if I tell them I hear a voice in my head, what then? They would tell me I'm possessed right?*

*Well, I might as well be.*

In fact he preferred that option, because if it left the realm of superstition he'd end up at the bullet end of a firing squad. The peace of a fort was only maintained by weeding out the monsters after all. If the distinction between human and monster wasn't made, then it would end with the collapse of civilization. A second calamity, per se.

At the end of the day, superstition was safer than reality because it held no consequence. The supernatural wasn't real, superstitions were just superstitions. But the reality decreed by science was harsh, cruel even.

A monster was a monster. A person was a person. And the Hunters filled the role of protecting people from monsters.



There were no supernatural powers involved when it came to the laws of nature.

There existed simple hereditary laws, natural hierarchies, and the average person was not responsible for questioning them. Hajoon wasn't a scientist, so the explanations that qualified scientists gave were enough.

No one questioned what was outside of their means, this was a law of society that Hajoon had never read in a book. There were many laws like that, never spoken, never written, but always followed.

It didn't concern him. He was just an office worker, so he simply indulged in superstition because it was lawless in a way.

*So if I'm possessed, what was that fog...? Ando couldn't see it, but he's just an idiot. It could have just been the weather changing, but snow isn't born from fog as far as I know. Why did that voice talk about a game? What kind of game? It was all so vague, I feel like I hallucinated it all. They talked about survival...so a survival game? Like the game shows where they take washed up actors and make them do silly competitions to milk some fame? Well, I wouldn't mind joining one if there was a cash prize...*

"Hmm..." Hajoon scratched at his left wrist absentmindedly, a habit he remembered no source for.

*Who was warning me? A guardian angel? But isn't it more of an evil spirit? It sure sounded evil, like some kind of demon. There was also the power outage, though was that a coincidence? Could a demon cut electricity to only one floor of a damn skyscraper?*

*Hm, but it's possible isn't it? Evil spirits do latch onto weak willed people...*

*There was a story circulating on the forums lately, an urban legend of sorts that overworked salary workers would inevitably get possessed and end up wandering aimlessly in the night. By dawn, they would be found in the river after having killed a person or two themselves.*

The legend of Mulgwi Wharf, where a drowned spirit haunted the waters and led others to the same fate. It was said to be the reason for the surplus of monster corpses washing up for the fishermen to fight over. Depending on the type of monster, it was the same as fishing up a winning lottery ticket.

Realistically, it was just the way that the locals coped with the high suicide rates, sharing these superstitions on the web made sense. Besides, many people had a morbid curiosity towards such things, Hajoon wasn't strange for reading supernatural forums during work hours. It wasn't as if he had a computer at home, and the one at the local bookshop was always hoarded by game addicted teens he couldn't win against.

But a story was a story. Even if SpinxEye himself had made a blog post about it—which he had re-read every word of before it vanished only hours later as per the anonymous figures routine—he shouldn't feel dread from reading theorized fiction.

*Then why am I shaking..?*

"It must be the blood loss..." Hajoong muttered to himself, shuffling to the side as the bus stop became crowded again, people rushing across the street as a bus chugged along in the distance, its headlights casting a stark spotlight through the falling snow. As it screeched to a stop in front of the impatient crowd, the blast of air emitted from the iron beast was welcomed by those at the forefront, as the hot air brought relief to their frozen limbs.

"Oh..! Tram 23's here, finally..!" Ando exclaimed, looking poised to sprint inside before his steps faltered, getting pushed aside by the less patient passengers until he was right back where he started. There was already a line, and quite a long one which moved at a snail's pace, which of course resulted in inevitable complaints from the stragglers.

"Bloody trams are always late...those drivers from the Riotbanks are bloody lazy..!"

"—It never snowed like this back in my youth—"

"I can't believe I have to wait even more—you're always wasting time shopping..!"

"Wha- how is a date a waste of time?? If you want a divorce just say it—" A lover's quarrel broke out in the snow, and Hajoong proceeded to tune them out.

"—My heels will get soggy at this rate...I had them imported from Nawia you know?" An asinine complaint caught his attention for a moment, and he glanced towards the two women who stood by the side of the tram. They were only a few steps away from entering, but Hajoong wasn't sure if they were patient enough to wait that long.

"Oh my..! Perhaps you should have checked the weather report in advance Ms. Veinclair? You wouldn't want to ruin such artisan shoes..!" Mrs. Baek, the rude old hag with the gaudy butterfly hairpin was holding an umbrella up for the young Veinclair, who was preoccupied with trying to save her red gilded shoes from the piling snow.

*I hope she gets frostbite.*

Hajoong looked back at the tram car in front of him, staring at the intricate phoenix reminiscent designs that were ingrained into its metal exterior along with the number 23. They were a sign of artisan crafts from the North, with both Nawia and Buxiu historically feuding for the trademark over Phoenix imagery. Which meant that he was wrong to call it a bus. In fact, it would have been quite embarrassing if anyone had heard him call a tram a bus.

It would be more graceful to shout 'I'm poor!' at the top of his lungs.

"Will you be alright Mr. Park..?" Ando suddenly asked, and Hajoon almost flinched as he found his hand on his shoulder. "You take tram 13 right? It looks like you'll have to wait for a while..."

"Yes...are you alright? You look a bit pale..." Lee Hyejin said, joining the pity party with her hazel eyes looking up at him in, well, pity.

*What about me is pale?*

Hajoon could have almost laughed at that, but he didn't.

"Ah...no, I'm fine! Haha, it's nothing serious, don't worry!"

*Yeah! Don't worry, being possessed by an evil spirit is no big deal! I definitely haven't gone insane!* He thought sarcastically as he smiled to rid himself of the pity party that he hadn't asked for.

"Oh...then we'll be going ahead..."

Hajoon waved them off as they joined the queue, ignoring the cold that set into place as the crowd around him depleted. It was still painful, the task of breathing. The icy air didn't help.

As he was left feeling the cold seep straight into his bones, the heated and well lit interior of the tram started to look rather inviting, but he couldn't exactly follow after Lee Hyejin and Ando. This type of tram would never so much as step foot in Nagwon, so it was pointless to get on.

So Hajoon stood there, shivering as he watched strangers and coworkers file into the warmth of the tram, chatting with the oddly friendly driver as they went. Mrs.Baek, being the prissy old hag she was, looked less than amused at the driver's cheery greeting, glaring at the poor man who simply smiled at her.

"You were *late*...and not so much as an apology for your customers? If this is how the workers are, then it was no wonder they cut your funding."

"Oh I got here as fast as I could...you don't see no other bus round ere ya? That means you can rely on me ma'am! So don't you fret, you'll be right where you belong soon!" The driver with the greying hair and a raccoon-like smile to him chuckled with a nonchalant air, earning a scowl from the old hag.

"This is a tram, Driver. Not a bus. And a tram does not arrive late, no matter the circumstance." The ash haired Ms. Veinclair huffed, looking down her nose at him.

"Apologies missy! It won't happen again! But please don't hold up the line, the poor lad is freezing!" The driver ushered her forward as she grumbled in distaste, but he ignored her, instead looking over at Hajoon who could have been mistaken as a part of the stop sign that he was leaning against in the darkness.

Hajoon's eyebrows darted upwards in surprise, wishing to vanish into the darkness as unwanted attention fell onto him from both the driver and the passengers aboard the tram.

"Don't just stand there, hop on lad! You'll freeze waiting for that rust bucket, it ain't coming!" The old man called out impatiently.

He knew where Hajoon was headed. It really only took one glance at him to guess huh?

*Hahh...just leave me to freeze. Annoying old man...*

"I can get you to Hongno, it's close enough to the wharf right? Sorry if it ain't, can't go any further than Red Street tonight..."

*...What in the moons? Now he knows where I live? If that isn't a red flag I don't know what is-*

Hajoon could hear the other passengers starting to complain, so he quickly made his way inside, bowing at the driver.

"Sorry...and thank you. Don't worry, Hongno is fine."

Hongno, or Red Street as the foreigners called it, was the name for the belt of entertainment sectors that lay in proximity to the city. It was so that city dwellers could crawl down for the night after their day jobs wrung them dry. Vices, as they call it, left the air of Hongno stinking of alcohol, legally sold illegal narcotics, and the poisonous cosmetics that adorned too many faces.

Hajoon couldn't say he felt comfortable walking those streets at night, but it was close enough to his apartment that he could hypothetically walk home in an hour or two if the weather didn't get any worse.

Well, that was if the driver wasn't out to get him. In that case, he would be staggering home missing another kidney.

"What a polite lad! Tell the missus her tea is the best in town! Us drivers would freeze without her!" The driver laughed, clapping Hajoon on the back before he stumbled into an empty seat.

He was struck silent by embarrassment and confusion as the tram jostled into motion, opting to ignore the unfortunate seating mistake made in his haste, as well as the nosy result of it.

*Missus...who..?*

"I didn't know you were married...wow, congrats!" Ando said with a sting of jealousy in his voice. He had complained about being single before, so it made sense that he would react like that.

*But that wasn't the point..!*

"I'm not..?"

"Hajoon-ssi...why didn't you invite us to the wedding...?" Lee Hyejin asked with some faux sadness. It wasn't clear if she was making fun of him or not.

*This was ridiculous.*

"Because there wasn't one to invite you to...?" Hajoon laughed awkwardly, feeling another wave of a headache starting to pound between his eyebrows.

*He must have meant missus as in mother...but my mother doesn't live here. Is it boss he meant? Oh whatever, that old man just knows someone who knows me, it doesn't matter who. At least then I don't have to worry about organ trafficking.*

"If you're sure, but— you should tell us about important things like that, at least, right? We're on the same team..." Lee Hyejin tried to smile sweetly, but it didn't have the desired effect as Hajoon's smile flipped to a frown for a moment.

*You have no right to lecture me, Lee Hyejin.*

"Of course, but am I at fault when the event you missed was something that never happened?" Hajoon kept his smile as polite as possible, hoping that Lee Hyejin would notice his discomfort and shut her mouth. It was getting hard for him to fake a smile while his head pounded with a migraine that made him want to rip out his brain and stick it in the snow outside for relief.

"Oh, well...yes, sorry. It's just that you keep to yourself, and I didn't want there to be a tense environment at work..! We're a team! Right Ando-ssi?"

"Eh..? Oh, of course!" Ando seemed nervous as usual, his eyes jittering between his coworkers who were smiling at each other threateningly.

"...Then I apologize, for making you feel as though I don't trust the others of the publicity team. That isn't the case." Hajoon relented first, focusing on the flurry of snow outside of his window, which seemed to grow in intensity as time passed and the tram continued onwards without making a single stop.

That was strange.

Many of these passengers lived in the residential quarters that encircled the business sector, and no matter how incompetent this driver was, he should have made at least a few stops by now.

"Excuse me driver...you were meant to make a stop at Ashford Square? Was there a change to the route perhaps...? " The polite voice of a blue eyed man was the first to question this peculiar predicament, receiving barely a look back from the old man in question.

"Our stop too...! You missed it, it's-"

"Hey...!! Stop...! I see my stop-" Another voice cut over the last, multiple locations being called out as the tram moved past them all. Many of the faces Hajoon saw were panicked, due to the bad weather, or the proposition of having to walk their way home in the middle of it all.

"Why aren't you stopping you crazy bastard-!" One of the middle aged men stood up suddenly, trying to grab the shoulder of the driver who ignored their words. But at that moment the tram accelerated without warning, and the spindly salaryman stumbled back, swearing as he managed to grab onto a handrail and not come crashing into the people who sat behind him.

"Please stay seated when the tram is moving, it's dangerous!" The driver finally spoke, but it only added fuel to a fire that had begun to burn within the confined space.

"Stop this tram at once...!" Ms. Veinclair snapped, her eyes narrowing in seething anger at the confused look she received from the undereducated driver. Hajoon wondered if she was a moron, expecting a driver to understand English and heed her command.

Her voice quickly blended into the chaos left by the speeding tram and its happily unresponsive driver.

*Hm...so this really is a new human trafficking tactic? Stealing a tram and acting as a driver to kidnap high profile people to get a big ransom?*

*Damn old man, couldn't he leave me out of it? He knows I'm as poor and desperate as he is...*

"Hey...that was my stop..." Ando spoke up as the panic rose within the speeding metal death trap.

"Why isn't he stopping..? Wait—are we on a bridge right now..??" He pressed his face against the glass, and upon seeing next to nothing in the darkness, he pushed the window open with surprising strength. The passengers near him yelped as the safety locking mechanism gave way and the freezing winds and snow billowed inside, sucking the comfortable warmth away in a heartbeat.

"What are you doing..??" Hajoon yelled over the howl of the wind, grabbing hold of Ando's arm as the man stuck his torso out of the window to stare at the churning water below.

"Close that..! It's dangerous..!!" Lee Hyejin's shriek was barely audible over the deafening sound of the engine blending with the wind that gushed into the tram.

"There's something in the water..!" Ando yelled back, ignoring the hands that tried to pull him back inside as he stared out at the black water and the waves that crashed against the pillars that stood as the bridge's foundations. It resembled the splashes made by a thrashing school of fish being herded by a predator, but it was too dark to make out anything but a shadow of the behemoth that lay under the waves.

"It looks damn huge..!! Wait—Do you think it's a monster!? How is a monster out here..?!"

"What..?? Forget that..!! Get back in here, idiot..!! You'll fall..!!" Lee Hyejin had gotten up, stepping on the seat to reach the madman who was dangling halfway off of a speeding tram, especially one that had accelerated to speeds comparable to a train.

Hajoon's grip on Ando slipped as he took his glasses off of his face, trying to get a glimpse of what Ando was so transfixed on. His fingers gripped onto the window ledge as he tried to see through the snow that pelted his face, but Ando's scarf was acting as a windmill against the snowy winds, slapping Hajoon in the face.

"Gh..!" He yelped, shielding his face as he squinted into the greyscale world that his cursed eyes relayed to him. The cement of the bridge's edge, the wires jutting upwards and supporting the large architectural marvel, then the churning water below—he saw it all plain as day.

He saw what Ando could not. A giant fin jutting out of the water. To a human eye, it could have been mistaken for the sail of a sailboat. Hajoon wanted to see it as that too, he could have believed it was a sailboat, until it moved.

The sail rose from the water, becoming miniscule as the body of a serpentine creature blocked out the faint visage of the moon behind its towering mass. Jagged teeth off mass quantities became visible as the monster opened its mouth, then blurred in a moment of scrambled movement as the window slammed shut and Hajoon was pulled along by Lee Hyejin's grip as they all fell to the ground

He was shaking, his breath coming in puffs as he stared at that closed window, seeing nothing but the silver moon and the snow that shrouded it as his own eyes dilated, drinking in the silver light.

"There's nothing there..." He chuckled to himself, blinking away the tingling sensation in his eyes before he searched around for his glasses and put them back on his face.

He staggered to his feet, watching Ando struggle to do the same as the tram lurched forward to leave the bridge and the monster behind. Lee Hyejin, who finally let go of the collar of the snow-covered Ando, had a dark expression on her face, from which the nervous man looked away.

*I must have seen wrong. It can't be a monster. Monsters can't leave the perimeter of a dungeon. Only dead corpses wash up here. A living monster can't be here. It can't.*

\\ Now Entering ~~Unnamed~~ Dungeon \\

As if to mock him, those words appeared in front of his face. Solid and without a voice, they stayed, even as a pressure started to squeeze his lungs until he saw red.

*What..? What Dungeon..? It hurts...Hahaha...*

But this time it wasn't just him, the others around him keeled over when he managed to stay upright, splatters of blood painting the floor of the tram whose engine sputtered, fizzled then cut out, taking the warmth and light with it.

In the cacophony of screams and groans of pain, a single voice rang clear in Hajoon's head.

[The game has begun.]



# Chapter 3

[It seems I don't have the advantage of time that I had hoped for...]

The voice mused, the low growl of a predator grating at Hajoon's mind, making his efforts of rationalizing the situation useless.

"What is this..?! Let me out..!!" The salaryman's banshee-like screeching rang through the tram as he began banging at the doors that had closed behind the driver just moments before. Every thud of his fists against the metal left him more battered than the blood splattered metal that he failed to dent.

"Open the doors you Riotbanker scum..!! Is this how you serve your betters?!" He screamed after the shadow of a man in the billowing snow, retreating out of sight as he left his passengers to rot.

"He...said help would come...? Liar...Liar..!!" Ms.Veincliff was shaking, covering her ears to the pained screams of a man who was spasming in the seat next to her. Her tag along—Mrs. Baek— had long abandoned her, joining the few who stood with the strength of their own two feet.

Ms.Veincliff was right to be hysterical for once, the driver had in fact lied. Hajoon had witnessed it first hand, the old man smiling as he talked down the angry mob with unnatural ease, promising to lead them to safety as he showed his key as a reason for them not to rip him to pieces. With a heartfelt apology for his terrible service, he had unlocked the doors with the promise that help was on the way, that the tram was equipped with an automatic distress signal if it were to break down.

At that moment, the people had believed him, because they—who were like mice bleeding out in a mousetrap—had tasted the cold breath of freedom.

Only seconds later, it was ripped away from them. The door had slammed shut. Only two men had managed to brute force their way through before freedom became an abstract and unattainable concept. .

Their screams had followed shortly after. There was a coat of red on the windows by the exit door, and Hajoon could only assume what happened to the two men.

*Blood, the stench...it's everywhere.*

Hajoon winced as Lee Hyejin gripped his arm for support, her head ducked as her light lunch was heaved onto the bloody floor. She was trembling, the dark green of her flats marred with blood and her own vomit even as she flinched away from the puddle near her feet as if burned.

"Why is this happening..?" She whispered, wiping the vomit from her lips as she stared straight at the eyes of the dead. There in the seat in front of her, was a stranger, his strikingly blue eyes

lifeless, as if the blood that had poured from them had drained him of the life and glory associated with that colour.

He was from Nawia, the country of true north, so he looked strangely peaceful in the cold. Cold and dead. It was hard to watch as the colleague of the dead man shook his shoulder, clawing at the man's suit.

"Hey...get up Nik...you shouldn't sleep on the tram you know..." The man donning a fedora hat and darker blue eyes pushed the body, his eyes shaking in disbelief as his colleague simply fell over, the head dragging to the side as droplets of blood fell to the ground.

"I don't think he's sleeping..." Ando murmured as he crouched down in front of the bleeding face, pushing a finger under the dead man's nose. His own nose was bleeding, but he ignored it as he sat there for a number of minutes. Hajoon saw that his legs were shaking.

"Yep, no breathing..." Ando wiped at his nose and glanced up at the angry eyes of the fedora man, then paused. "Well, we can't rule out that he could be in shock..! Right...in that case we need to call the militia, the civil service division should be able to get him...and the others to the hospital."

"Yes..yes we need to get you to the hospital, Nikolai..." The man grabbed his colleagues shoulders and pushed him upright on the seat again, letting go only to grab and fix the slumping body over and over again. The movement seemed to line up with the thumping of fists on the doors, losing power over time as the people grew tired and the fedora man's shoulders slumped.

Eventually, both gave up.

"You're shaking..." Lee Hyejin looked up at Hajoon, the resigned fear in her eyes reflecting his. She stood there, staring at him as the screams around them died down, and more cold bodies sagged on the seats like permanent passengers of a cold metal grave.

"I thought you were supposed to be the calm one...? Why is Ando-ssi filling your role right now haha.." She continued, to no response.

"Breathe. You can't do anything if you don't breathe."

Her words barely registered in his ears as he clutched at his chest, struggling to comply with such a simple request. The air around him felt oppressive, the stench of death overwhelming to the point that did not want to breathe at all, if only to avoid the smell that imprinted into his racing mind.

*Why are they dying..? What is this..? A Dungeon won't kill people like this...if it did, dad would have died, all of them would have died. How are the mines any different from this..??*

[Would you like an answer to that question? Or will you scream at me again like a fool?]

*Hahaha...! Tell me then!!*

[This is a Dungeon, the birth of a Dungeon, for it has no name.]

*...No way. Dungeons aren't just **born** like a living thing. This isn't a Dungeon...it's...! Some sort of attack...! Chemical warfare is something the Western Fort was developing... but why would they...? We're their vessel, they wouldn't just throw away a port city like that...*

[Hush fool. I need you to leave this metal box quickly, there is an unpleasant presence approaching.] The voice growled, making his head splinter with pain.

[There is much to accomplish in this Dungeon, and you are no use to me dead.]

"This isn't a dungeon..!" He hissed through a shuddering breath as he let his hand fall from his heart. The pain intensified for a moment before he grit his teeth and inhaled, the voice fading away until only disgruntled white noise remained.

"...What?" Lee Hyejin squinted up at him, her hand on his arm squeezing painfully. "You...saw that too, Hajoon-ssi?"

"...Huh? You two saw something? What is it?" Ando craned his head back to look at them, then finally stood up from where he had become stationary.

"The foggy message...you didn't see it Mr. Ando?" She asked, letting go of Hajoon who winced away.

"Foggy..? What does that mean? Was it something someone wrote on the window or...?"

"No, it's nothing. This can't be a dungeon so we don't have to worry about that." Hajoon spoke up, staring at his blood stained palm before wiping it on his pants.

"How are you sure about that..?" The fedora man asked, his shaking eyes radiating an anger that Hajoon couldn't place. "You saw it, the gods' letter. Or would your kind deny evidence that was right in front of your face?"

Hajoon scoffed, taken aback by the anger directed towards him by the stranger. Those stormy blue eyes glared at him as if he was the killer, and the reason for the unexplainable carnage around them.

It was almost irritating to hear such accusations from a man that looked native to Hwanryeo rather than Nawia, despite his blue eyes. But a northerner was a northerner, they were all the same.

“My kind...? Didn’t you hear that my kind crawled out of the dungeons a century ago? Us monsters are more qualified to identify a dungeon than you northerners, don’t you think?” Hajoong snapped, forgetting himself to a fresh stab of pain mixed with anger.

“Monsters aren’t qualified for anything. If you were a monster, you wouldn’t have lived to look like a sunbaked giraffe.” The man snarled, stepping in front of his dead colleague as if to protect him from Hajoong.

Hajoong stared at the hostile blue of his eyes, then glanced at the empty and serene blue of the corpse he protected. Then he paused at the glimpse of a pistol holstered under the fedora man’s coat.

“...Sure.” Hajoong relented, but a sudden laugh from Ando startled him and he looked at the man incredulously.

“I’ve never seen a giraffe for real, but it’s a funny thought..! You are pretty tall huh?”

“Uh—yeah..? Haha..” He chuckled awkwardly, avoiding those fierce blue eyes as he bent to pick his briefcase off the ground. His umbrella had fallen out of the leather clasp that had held it snug to the body of the briefcase, so he busied himself with fixing it back into place.

“Oh yeah! I was meaning to ask, what’s a god’s letter? Never heard of it!” Ando directed his curious eyes at the Fedora man, scratching at his head in confusion.

*Good question. What is that? The north has the Church of the Last Flame, but the door to door scammers that show up in the slums never mentioned any letter from their god.*

“Oh...it’s nothing important, if you cannot see it then there’s no need for you to know what it is, Mr..?” The storm in the man’s eyes waned as he gave a hesitant smile to Ando.

“Oh...haha, Ando, Ando Natsuki” Ando said as he reached out a hand.

The man stared at it, then wiped his bloody hands on his pants repeatedly before taking the offered hand and giving a curt shake. “ Ivan Han. I work at the Hunter’s Tower, just a simple receptionist...haha!”

“Oh..! Wow, that’s cool! You get to see hunters every day..! Have you ever seen Hojo-sama up close—” Ando bit his tongue as he noticed the disapproving look in Lee Hyejin’s eyes.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Han, really, but this isn't the time for pleasantries. We need to find a way out, and to call for help...for your friend as well" Lee Hyejin said as she stepped forward, her steps uncertain in the darkness as she attempted to avoid the puddles of blood she could not see. She looked between the nonresponsive Han and the dead man, waiting as he finally acknowledged her presence.

"Oh. Right...Miss...?"

"Lee."

"Aha...yes, Ms. Lee, I agree. I apologize if I was being..."

"Difficult? Don't worry, this is hard for everyone. But we need to get out first...right?"

Suddenly her hand was on Hajoon's shoulder, making the man freeze where he was hunched over, his fingers skidding from the window that he had been trying to pry open.

"...It won't open." He winced as his fingers stung from the scratches he had just earned. It was cold, dark, and the first signs of frostbite could be seen blooming along the tips of his fingers, much like the frost that had covered the window glass and frozen it shut.

It was hard to see what lay beyond it, outside where the storm raged with bellowing winds that almost sounded like howls of pain if he focused on it for too long. He took a step back moving to another window to try again, but his hand flinched away as he felt the cold hand of another corpse gripping the windowsill as they had fallen halfway onto the ground.

This time, he simply didn't look at the face, even if he vaguely recognized the colour of the man's tie.

"Here, let me try!" Ando said as he rolled up his sleeves and stumbled his way through the darkness, nearly tripping over the corpse that he could barely see.

"Ack...what's this?" He nudged the body with his foot, to which Hajoon grabbed his arm and tugged him forward to avoid trampling a dead man further.

"Must be a bag, just...try to open this. But I think it's frozen shut..." Hajoon tapped at the window, hoping Ando could at least hear where it was and stop fumbling around. There was another body there, curled up into a ball in the seat to the right. But he didn't want to know who it was, so he didn't look.

"Hey, no big deal, I opened it before! I'm stronger than I look, hehe!" Ando smiled at the shape of Hajoon that he could see retreating in the darkness as he went to work trying to brute force the window open.

“Well you certainly don’t look it.” Ivan Han chuckled as he walked over to observe, his shaking hands hidden from sight in his coat pockets.

“Hey...I’ll...um, I’ll look for survivors.” Lee Hyejin spoke with an uncertain tone, her eyes darting about as if expecting a monster to pop out from behind every dark corner.

“Yeah...I’ll help” Hajoon glanced at her and patted her shoulder hesitantly before staring down the walkway of the tram and the dead who lined the way. There was movement here and there, twitching limbs, some sobbing shoulders; but the only others who stood with their own feet were the group by the door a few feet away, huddling and whispering among themselves.

“I can’t see anything...does anyone have a flashlight...? Or a candle...?”

“Ah...no, I don’t.” Hajoon said as he watched Lee Hyejin take an inch of a step forward into the darkness.

“Don’t you have a lighter?” He stared at the chain smoker Lee Hyejin until she nodded and fumbled in her coat pockets to find the silver metal lighter she always had on hand.

With a click of metal and a singular spark, a small flame came to life from her hand, chasing the oppressive darkness away for a moment. Hajoon had to blink to adjust to the low light, as it was less convenient than the night vision granted by simply looking over his glasses.

“Thanks for reminding me I had this...”

“Yeah. Just don’t waste the fuel.” He responded curtly, glancing back at the backs of Ando and Han as they fussed over the window they failed to open.

“Damn thing should open..! A window is designed to open and shut...!! Not stay shut damn it!! True Nawian craftsmanship wouldn’t fail in warm temperatures like this...!! ” It was Ivan Han’s words that stopped Hajoon from walking closer, deciding it was trouble to be caught in the middle of a raging northerner.

“Should we shatter it..? The glass?” Ando piped in, but was met with a hiss of long winded logic, logic that only a northerner would have.

“We couldn’t even if we tried, Mr. Ando..! This damn glass is infused with the scales of the Zmei, a godforsaken dragon..! It was designed to be unbreakable so that nobility could travel without fear of assassination...It will not break to a damn bazooka, so we cannot even discuss using mere human strength..!!”

*Oh. So we’re fucked. Good to know.*

“Hey, there’s people...” Lee Hyejin’s words made Hajoon look back at the huddled group, most of whom were now walking their way. They must have heard Ivan Han’s declaration of doom, because their faces were twisted in fear and contempt.

“You! Young lady..! Come here! We need some light here..!” A gruff voice called out, his shadow moving forward without a thought given to the fallen corpses he trampled.

“Yes..! We were trying to open this door again! My husband managed to get through before, you saw right..? I can hear him calling, so help us miss!” A delusional woman’s voice rang out after him, her bleeding eyes coming into view as they both stepped into the range of the small flame.

It was unlikely that she could see too well at the moment, which could explain why she grasped the man’s shirt.

“Your...husband is outside?” Lee Hyejin asked, moving her lighter closer to a window to peer out into the snowy void beyond.

“Yes..! He’s trying to help us but the man’s too egotistical..! I can’t let him try and fail on his own..! He...he told me to come and help him...”

*Ah. The arguing couple from before...*

*The bored looking man from then, I did see him leave. Didn’t even look like he tried to take her with him.*

*Well he’s dead now, ma’am. Hah, but I won’t tell her that.*

Hajoon looked at the woman in pity, covering his nose against the stench of blood as he followed Lee Hyejin to the front doors.

“Hey..! It’s dark again, don’t leave us behind Hyejin-ssi!” Ando fumbled forward, before bumping into Hajoon who had been kept back by the burly man who glared at him, then smiled at Lee Hyejin.

“Please get away from him, miss, this Riotbanker is in cahoots with that bloody driver..!” He hissed with unfounded conviction. Hajoon felt his head pound at the nonsensical situation, but he couldn’t blame the foreigner. It was really the driver’s fault, making him into an accomplice scapegoat for a crime he didn’t commit.

Hajoon glanced over the burly foreigner’s shoulder, noticing a few familiar faces, one resembling a stick bug, and another donning a butterfly shaped hairpin. Both were glaring at him.

“I saw him speaking secretly to that hapless kidnapper...don’t you think it’s strange? They seem to know each other well...” Mrs. Baek said thoughtfully, purposefully fanning the flames.



“That’s right..! This bastard was all buddy buddy with that fucker..!!” A fist came to grab Hajoons collar, the blood from the salaryman’s raw skin smudging onto his tie. “Did you plan this..?! How much is he paying you?!!”

Hajoons winced as flakes of spit sprayed in his direction, trying to keep a civil expression as he looked down at the seething man. “Sir...please, I’m bleeding out like the rest of you—”

“It’s some kind of ploy, I know it..!! You rats want to see us hard workers die..!!”

*Hah...my head hurts.*

“Whoa there..! Calm down sir, he’s a good guy, not like them, ok..?” Ando spoke up, taking the initiative to pry the man’s hand off of Hajoons. The seething man didn’t seem to want to let go, but his face twisted into shock as he was forced to do so by an Ashiharan man like Ando.

Ando had authority by blood, which was funny to Hajoons who had only known him to be a crazed fanboy.

*Hahaha...ow. It hurts. Fuck.*

“Why are you taking a roach’s side..?”

“...This is my coworker, please don’t say things like tha—” Ando’s response was cut short as he heard a yelp from behind him.

“Gah..! What’s wrong Mr. Han??” He whirled around, gripping Hajoons arm to orient himself in the darkness. He noticed that the man didn’t so much as flinch, or respond, but he didn’t have the time to question Hajoons sudden stillness.

“Something grabbed my leg...!!” The shadow of the frightened man hissed in response, gripping onto a handrail to move forward, dragging something along behind him. “Ghhh...demon, you won’t be dragging me to hell today..!” He hissed, trying to kick at the mass that clung to his tailored pants.

A woman’s shriek gave him pause as his shoe was planted on a head of long ashen hair. The waves of well-curled hair fell away as a pair of green eyes looked up at him, angry despite the tear-stricken state of her face.

“I’m not a demon you insolent man..!” She spat in English, her delicate fingers letting go of his leg to push her hair out of her face as she managed to tremble onto her haunches.

She reached out her hand, her eyes expectant.

“Help me up. You are a Nawian gentleman aren’t you?”

Ivan Han felt his face colour from embarrassment as he hesitantly took that hand, hoisting her to her feet.

“Ahem. Uh...not exactly– I mean, I was simply surprised. Apologies, lady..?”

“Sophia Veinclair” She huffed as she fixed her long pleated skirt, frowning at the blood that clung to the expensive fabric.

The man’s blue eyes widened at that and his lips pressed into a thin line before he looked away from the noblewoman.

“Oh, you’re...hello, I-I’m from the publicity team..!” Ando gave a hurried bow to the high ranking example of nepotism.

She glanced down at Ando’s bowed head and scoffed. “Yes, I know. So is that one, right?” She pointed a finger at Hajoon, who had started shaking. Soon, he stopped, his head creaking back to look at them, his lips stretched in a grin that bared the canines he normally hid so well.

“Heh, it’s here.” He said as his now fully silver eyes flickered in the darkness. He glanced down at the ash haired Veinclair and sneered. “Hair like ash...well now, that witch spreads her curse like wildfire doesn’t she? Haha..! Well, no matter. You’ll die soon.”

“...What? Was that a threat...?? Who do you think you are..?! You don’t even have the decency to greet your superior–”

“I see something outside..!” Lee Hyejin spoke up, her words hushing the discourse as all eyes tried to follow the movement of the light she held. Human’s feared the dark afterall, they would not dare stray from the light, much less when monsters prowled the shadows it cast.

“There’s a person–” Her words cut out as the sound of crunching and scraping metal screeched through the air, making her clamp her hands over her ears, the light in her hand being snuffed in an instant.

The group near the door stumbled away as they saw the faint moonlight filter in through a marred gap between the doors. What held that gap open were pale hands, long black nails digging into the metal as it crumpled like paper. Those hands pulled, and the metal peeled away, folding into itself until there was no door left.

Snow billowed in like a flood of white light, and through the empty strom beyond them, a man stepped into the tram. At first glance, he resembled a paper boy, with the familiar clothing and cap that sat atop a head of snow white hair. His arms were tucked into the pockets of trousers in

a casual gait as he walked towards the people who shrunk back at his every step. He paused, taking off his cap and giving a flourished bow.

“Good evening dear passengers! I heard you’re in need of a new guide?” The man grinned, sharp teeth flashing.

“D-Devil...!!” Mrs. Baek shrieked as her eyes darted between the teeth and the small horns protruding from his head, tripping over the others as she tried to get away. But it was in vain, as she was pushed down by others who shared her desperation, left shaking on the ground as sacrifice for the approaching death.

The so-called devilish tour guide stepped toward a terrified woman and grinned, crouching down in front of her. For a moment he simply stared, which only made her more desperate.

“S-step away...! I..I’m a good woman, I work hard...!! You...you can’t do this...!!” She hissed at him, her hands clutched near her heart. But her words only received a snicker.

“You disgusting devil...!! Go eat a rotting carcass like the filth you are-”

The devil’s grin widened as his hand shot out to grab her face, silencing her.

“Devil...? Really? Hey, auntie, do I look like a devil to you? Come on now..! You’re from the great nation of Joseon aren’t you? Don’t you remember how you used to hunt us, how we hunted you right back?!” He growled, his inhuman smile bared at her. As Mrs. Baek sobbed some sort of muffled prayer, the man began to laugh, his head thrown back in its intensity.

He suddenly stopped, his eyes serious as he pushed his face right up to her. “Dokk-ae-bi.” He enunciated every syllable, then smiled. “At least remember what you humans called us, hm?”

Then there was a crunch. Sickening, disgusting, as her skull was crushed like a tin can. The Dokkaebi then let go, her body falling limp to the ground.

He then turned on his heel, facing the survivors who stood frozen in fear.

“Well then, that’s the last of the weak ants! Congratulations! Being one step above an ant is a great accomplishment! Haha!”

# Chapter 4

“Hm...! Now look at this! It’s wonderful how our little dungeon knows how to make our jobs easier!” The grinning dokkaebi inhaled deeply as if the pungent smell of death was the most fragrant of roses, his eyes scanning across the trembling survivors, their fear bringing a smile to his face. The blood from his palm trickled down the sharp tips of his nails and splattered into the puddle of fresh redness beneath his feet, spilling from the woman's skull like ooze from a rotting tomato.

“Well, ants! Wait–no, I just said you were stronger than ants...hm, beetles then?” The dokkaebi mused to himself as he sauntered over to the biggest of the beetles, expecting the burly man to put up a fight of some sort.

“Are you a strong beetle, or...a weak beetle?” He tilted his head, looking up at the blonde foreigner, who only vaguely understood the archaic dialect of the white haired youth.

“Wha–?! What are you..?? Monster..!!” The man hissed, stepping back hesitantly as his eyes flickered to the dead woman's face, or what was left of it.

“What am I? A dokkaebi! I told that ajumma over there, but she wouldn’t believe me!” His smile fell into a look of sadness for a moment as he glanced at her dead body.

“Do you see what happens to ants who don’t believe me...?” His friendly tone fell suddenly, the air around him seeming to grow still and oppressive as he stared at the man start to heave for breath, blood trickling from his nose.

“Oh, so boring, so weak.” He sighed, his breath heard but not seen, unlike the shuddering breaths that fogged the tram with signs of life. He followed those fog trails like a hound after a rabbit, stopping to lean into the face of a trembling woman, whose fingers fumbled with a silver lighter until a flame burst forth to illuminate her pretty face. That flame should have burnt him, which was her hope, but he did not even flinch as it caressed the skin of his chin.

“Do *you* believe me, noona?”

The woman’s hazel eyes widened as she tried to stop herself from flinching away, her lip trembling before she managed a quick “Yes”.

“Good! Then I’ll teach you how to survive! That’s a good deal isn’t it?” He reached a hand to grip her shoulder. She froze in place, her heartbeat stopping for a moment as she felt the intense pressure of the monster’s presence.

“Oh no no, please breathe big sis, I can’t teach you how the system works if you don’t!” He insisted, shaking her shoulder rather violently without a thought spared for her panicked expression.

“Get...away from her..!” The dokkaebi heard the hiss of an uncertain voice and looked up over the woman’s shoulder to meet the barrel of the gun that greeted him. The brown haired man who held that gun felt a shudder of disgust run through him at the wide toothy grin that the monster gave in response.

“Move. Or I shoot.” The man gripped the pistol harder, stilling the shaking of his fingers through sheer force.

“Mr. Ando— Give that back right now..! A civilian isn’t permitted to hold a—” The hiss of reprimand from the blue eyed man was interrupted as Ando pushed out of the man’s reach, using the low moonlight to find his footing in the darkness while his cursing pursuer stumbled into a row of seats behind him.

“If you won’t use it, I will!!” Ando yelled, more so as a sign of conviction to himself, who had not held a firearm in over a year. His eyes were still as he stared out at the flickering flame his co-worker held, the pistol’s end aligned with the disgusting grin that was barely illuminated.

“I said. Move.” He hissed, his uncertain fingers trembling over the trigger, fearing that the monster was too close to Lee Hyejin, that if he pulled the trigger, the monster would push her into the way of the oncoming bullet.

The dokkaebi blinked, then his head tilted back as he let out a hysterical cackle, an uncomfortable sound that bounced off the walls of the metal grave and echoed in the ears of the cowering survivors.

“Good..! At least one of you has a backbone!” He exclaimed as he wrapped an arm around Lee Hyejin’s neck, tugging her into a chokehold. Ando stiffened, his finger twitching slightly over the trigger as he met the terrified eyes of his coworker.

“You want me to move, right? Well how about this? You do something for me, and I’ll do what you say! That’s how things work around here after all!” The dokkaebi smiled, inhaling before clear white smoke spilled from his lips like the breath of a dragon, dancing through the air to form a familiar rectangle within which words were inscribed like a contract.

### **[ A Guide’s Contract**

Condition: Kill 1 participant per the Guide’s request

Reward: The guide will move away from participant | Lee Hyejin | ]

“I remembered that ants—uh, beetles learn best from example! I’m such a great guide!” The dokkaebi laughed as he waited for the angry and perplexed expression of the brown haired Ashiharan to change to understanding and desperation, but it didn’t.

“What are you laughing about monster..?! I said *move*. Let her go, *now*. ” Ando gritted out, his eyes dark and still as his arms poised the pistol, phasing through the floating words that had brought an oppressive silence to his surroundings.

“You can’t see it...?” The dokkaebi blinked, his grin falling as he stared at the pistol and the black eyes of the wielder. “Then why are you alive...? That’s not how this *works*...”

“I’ll shoot..!” Ando repeated, taking a step forward, the unacknowledged screen of words following him.

“Hah? Then shoot. But without a contract, this woman is dead.” The dokkaebi stated flatly, grabbing her neck and letting the tips of his nails press at the exposed skin. He glanced behind him at the few beetles scuttling their way to the open door, and he backed up with her to block the exit.

“N-no..! Let me through..! My Woojin is calling...he’s in pain and he wants to see me..!” The hysterical woman begged, but was pulled back from clawing at the monster blindly by the burly man who hissed out a string of foreign swears.

“Shut up auntie. He’s dead.”

“No he isn’t..!” She snapped back at the dokkaebi, who now looked dejected, his incessant grin nowhere to be found.

“Why does no one listen to me...? Do I look stupid? Hah...I’d quit this job if I could.” He muttered to himself, tapping his sharp nails against Lee Hyejin’s neck as if fidgeting.

“I said I’ll shoot!!”

The dokkaebi cringed as he was reminded of the nuisance pointing a metal toy to his face.

“Then I’ll kill her..? Just accept my contract damn it! Let me do my job..!!”

“What contract..?? What job..?!” Ando yelled, something in his eyes snapping as he pulled the trigger.

A gunshot rang out, but the dokkaebi was standing there unharmed, staring at the indent left on the wall to his right.

“Stop. *Now*. Mr. Ando. Do you want Ms. Lee to die..?!” The blue eyed man gripped Ando’s wrist tighter, struggling against the man to keep the pistol’s muzzle pointed away from the monster and his hostage.

“You...made me miss. Let go. Mr. Han.”

"No. It's my pistol, I have the right to stop you." Ivan Han hissed out, trying to deescalate an impossible situation.

"And I have the right to use it if you cops are useless...!!" Ando snarled, trying and failing to rip his arm free of Han's grip.

"What...are you trying to achieve then, Mr. Ando?"

"Kill it. I'm going to kill it."

Han's blue eyes narrowed as he looked at the man's lightless eyes, then glanced at Lee Hyejin, who shook her head.

"Did you not notice...?" He whispered to Ando, gesturing with his eyes to the flickering flame that Lee Hyejin pressed against the monster's neck. The pale lifeless skin should have burned, peeled away, scarred, but none of that happened. It was as though the white haired monster wasn't there at all.

"Ms. Lee has been telling us that...it can't die. If it won't burn, a bullet will do nothing."

"That's right, ant. You can't hurt me, but I can kill you all!" The dokkaebi declared, glancing down at the flame before snapping his teeth around it, snuffing it out with a smirk.

"But you won't..."

"Heh?" The dokkaebi's smirk twitched as he glanced at the woman he held hostage, not expecting the terrified eyes to show the kind of fire that spoke against him.

"You are a guide, and a guide can't do their job if you have no one to guide...isn't that right?"

"...There is a quota yes, but that's none of your business noona." He huffed, tightening his hold on her neck until beads of blood trickled down.

"Ghk...so that...request, you said that that's how things work here...? It's...a contract?" Lee Hyejin gritted out, biting back the stabbing pain.

"...I guess so. Do you want to listen...to my explanation..?" The dokkaebi paused, before he suddenly let go of her, wiping his hands on his shirt as if he had just been handling something dirty. He didn't bother to stop Lee Hyejin as she stumbled to the side of a tall man, who silently shrugged away from her as his silver eyes stared dead on at the dokebi's.

"Ms. Lee..! Are you alright..?" Ivan Han asked in a hushed voice, afraid to break the sudden peace; his grip remaining on the arm of the dark eyed Ando who continued to glare at the monster he could not kill.



“...Yes, just a scratch.” She muttered, frowning at her silent coworkers who seemed so preoccupied by the dokkaebi that they didn’t even glance her way. She felt a sense of dread as she noticed the uncharacteristic grin that stretched across Hajoon’s face as he stared at the monster, and she took an uncertain step away from him.

“Attention please..!!” The voice that ran out made everyone’s heads snap to face the source, which was the grinning dokkaebi.

“Ahem..! Well, let me introduce myself again! I’m a Cham dokkaebi, and I’ve been assigned as your guide to surviving this beautiful new dungeon!” The dokkaebi gave another bow before he pressed his cap back over the small horns that sprouted from his head.

“First up, is the contract system! Many demons prefer to communicate through this system, forming a contract with them is your only hope of survival! How lucky you lot are to be able to see the contracts! Haha!” He cackled, stepping forward to grab the floating screen by Ando’s side and ripping it away from him, the sudden action making him cough and clutch at his chest.

The blue eyed Ivan Han used that moment of weakness to rip the pistol from Ando’s hand, holding it against his side in a death grip.

“See this? This is a contract! It can grant you skills and information, as long as you can get a demon to agree to your terms! Of course, no demon cares for the opinions of ants, and will simply force their own terms!”

The dokkaebi inhaled once again, the screen dissipating into smoke and being absorbed by him. He exhaled shortly after, an edited string of words taking form for all to see.

#### [ **A Guide’s Contract**

Condition: Kill participant | Ando Natsuki |

Reward: The skill *Iron Grip* ]

“That ant is cheating! So please kill him for me and I’ll teach one of you the skill that I used to open those doors for you!” He gestured grandly at the mangled metal doors behind him.

“Ando Natsuki...? Who...?” The desperate woman muttered, her eyes darting between the faces she saw in the shadows, rising from their fear driven stupor to step towards the moonlight.

“If I kill him...I’ll get strength like that?” A spindly man spoke up, his battered fists clenching as he stepped towards the man he assumed to be his target without a second thought. It was a mindless decision on all accounts.

“Hm? Now what is this?” Hajoon glanced back at the pathetic man who had approached him from behind, gripping a small switchblade in one fist—the type of flimsy blade one would use to peel an apple.

“Die scum..!” The man hissed out as he lunged forward, his vision swimming as he plunged that blade into his target's back. He could smell it, the fresh blood that spilled by his hand, but he felt no remorse killing a roach if he could live in exchange.

“Hrk..!!” He clutched at his stomach, stumbling back in a pained and confused stupor as he looked down at the knife hilt embedded in his own flesh and blood. Long and tan fingers gripped that hilt as it was twisted further into his abdomen, causing him to scream from the searing pain of his intestines being punctured.

“Haha..! Oh how it feels *good*, to see, smell, move, and *kill* of my own accord...It's been far too long..!” The silver eyed man chuckled, grinning as he raised his foot and kicked the bleeding man nonchalantly, using the momentum to rip the knife free from his stomach.

“H-Hajoon-ssi?!” Lee Hyejin shrieked, jolting away from the mind bending display of violence she had witnessed from a man she had long deemed as harmless.

“Hm? Is that his name? I've forgotten...” He tilted his head at her, taking a moment to wipe the blood on his sleeve before he stepped towards her. “This Ando Natsuki...I presume it is not you? Although naming conventions could change over the centuries I've missed...”

“Wha...what's wrong with you Hajoon..?!” She took a staggering step back, her eyes narrowing on the knife in his hand, then staring past him at the salaryman who was clutching his wound as he dragged himself away, gasping out the words “Monster” over and over again. Ivan Han was soon at his side, putting pressure on the wound with one hand while the other refused to loosen its vice grip on his pistol, his finger at the trigger and ready to shoot at a second's notice.

“...Hajoon-ssi, hey stop, you're scaring her...” A low voice made Hajoon crane his head back, staring at the hand that gripped his wrist. The owner of that hand wore a deluded smile, his dark eyes dead set on rationalizing the irrational.

“It...was just self defence right..? That's okay...let's all calm down yeah? I...got a bit carried away as well...”

“Oh..!” Hajoon's eyes squinted into a smile as he turned around with uncharacteristic fluidity, leading down to be eye to eye with Ando. “An Ashiharan! You really were quite stupid to shoot a guide you know, Ando Natsuki-san?”

Ando's eyebrows darted upwards at the familiar language, one that he had never heard his coworker speak before.

“E-eh..? You speak Nihongo..?”

“Yes? He can as well, to some extent, or forcing the skill would be more taxing.”

“He..? Who? What are you talking about—”

His words deteriorated into a yelp as Hajoon’s arm swung, the blade cutting an arc through where Ando’s head had been, a few strands of brown hair fluttering to the ground.

“...Dude what the hell?!?” Ando gasped out as he straightened himself out of the dodge, darting a few steps back down the aisle, the narrow space limiting his mobility.

“Haha..! Finally something fun to watch!” The dokkaebi cackled from his perch in front of the exit, only emboldening Hajoon who grinned and tapped the tip of the knife against his cheek as he watched his prey retreat.

“Don’t...don’t just do what a monster says..!! Why would you even trust its words??” Ando yelled out into the darkness as he was cornered further and further away from the reach of the faint moonlight, his eyes steadfast on the approaching shadow of his coworker and friend.

A friend that was suddenly out to kill him. A friend who only smiled, those familiar kind eyes devoid of empathy as he approached.

It was a look he was familiar with, and yet it was disorienting to see it from that face.

“You seem to know him, so I’ll make this quick.” Hajoon grinned, the visible canines making Ando flinch back, his foot snagging on a seat as he stumbled in the darkness.

“Aghk..!” He clawed at the plush headrest of a seat to catch himself, but when his eyes darted back to the approaching threat, all he saw was a trail of mist. He only had the chance to inhale before a hand appeared around his throat, shoving him to the floor with a thud that rang through his skull.

Ando clawed at that hand, his vision flashing white for a moment as he saw the flash of the knife being raised.

Then it came down, and Ando closed his eyes.

# Chapter 5

The melancholic sound of an alarm eroded by age, and the inability to breathe for several minutes until a pill of dubious origins disintegrated in stomach acid. That was my morning routine.

A splash of cold water, and the image of a sleepless face, fuzzy and out of focus in a cracked bathroom mirror. The sunlight that filtered in through the small window reeked of daytime, the dust and commotion of noon flooding my ears as I brushed my teeth.

I had overslept. But the bustle of midday was calmer, more relaxed than the storm of movement I could expect on a workday.

A calendar by the bed confirmed my suspicion, the dates blurred and unimportant save for the crossed out 13th, a friday, leaving today to be a saturday.

Like the lazy cat that roosted on the roof outside of my window, I felt the compulsion to sleep the day away. But one could not sleep on an empty stomach.

Placing my glasses on my face, I opened the window to lean out and stroke the soft feathers of Cheep, the black cat who often made a similar sound when demanding its daily fish tax from me.

“Good Morning, cheep cheepster.”

Cheep simply swatted my hand, stretching his wings before sauntering a few steps away to roll up under a new patch of sunlight. I didn’t mind it, crossing my arms as I let the fresh stench of fish imprint into my nostrils, the soft sea breeze soothing my headache for a moment.

After a few minutes, the pleasant scents of lunch preparations wafted my way from beyond the clusters of apartment buildings, and the smoke of those kitchens is what I followed through the grimy streets.

As per usual on a rare sunny day, crowds of men and women alike were milling about, any able bodied persons rushing to the wharf to get a piece of the newest bounty that had washed up following a particularly heavy storm the night before.

“Cap’n said it’s a B grade kraken..! The things are bigger than a boat so hurry it up!! We need every hand we can get!!” The fisherman called out as they gathered crowds on the way down.

“Come on, we have to beat em to it..! Get even a stray tooth from that thing and we’re set for weeks!” A younger man yelled to his drinking buddies as they quickly abandoned their seats at the tea house.

“Haha..! Yeah right, as if you won’t spent it all over at Hongno again!”

“Won’t even last a night!” Another friend slapped him on the back, and they quickly disappeared into the crowd that left the street empty of the ambitious men hoping to make a quick fortune—much to the dismay of the street vendors who were left with less gullible customers to prey on.

Of course, that didn’t deter them from yelling their sales pitches at any passerby.

“Freshest squid in the banks! Even fresher fried and filled with cheese!” One of the many street vendors called out as I passed by, and with the quick exchange of a bronze coin, I was biting into a crispy and cheese filled delicacy that burned my tongue with just the right amount of spice.

“I doused it in chili like you like it, so where’s my tip eh Hajoon?” Old man Ly raised a scarred eyebrow, the mirth in his eyes sign enough that he didn’t expect extra payment from a dirt poor man who masqueraded as respectable.

“You won’t need tips with how much of your sales is just me, old man.” I smiled and gave half a salute as I turned to go.

“Heading to the book shop?”

“Yeah, poor bastards have work to do on break days!”

“Ahaha..! Good on ya! Not that you do anything but sleep over there!” Ly laughed, a booming sound that faded as I walked on.

“Hey..! I can work in my sleep no problem..!” I called back as I maneuvered my way through the narrow roads and the midday crowds, avoiding the alleys that the dogs roamed in search of scraps as I was unwilling to become scrap meat today.

The ring of a bell, and the scent of coffee and old books; how I got to the small bookshop/ cafe/printing house was a mystery, but the smile that greeted me wasn’t.

“Good morning June!” The freckled woman smiled, resting a stack of books she’d been moving on the front counter. The wrinkles around Mrs. Anong’s eyes were easily overshadowed by her smile lines, a common sight as she never stopped smiling.

“It’s not morning, boss.” I smiled back as I took the books from her hands.

“It is for you, hm? Ah, did you eat dear?” She dusted her hands on her apron and wandered off to the kitchen in the back. “I’ve got leftover jok...hm and some omelets! Do you like rice porridge?”

“Ah, I ate on the way..! Just, tell me where to put these at least!” I called back, my arms trembling slightly from the hefty stack of books I was left carrying.

Her muffled response was interrupted by the ring of the bell, a familiar teen sauntering inside. I didn’t think much of it until Chae Minho cleared his throat, his hands leaving his pockets for once to extend an envelope to me.

“Here, teach. It’s the money for the past three months.”

“Hah..? I told you you don’t have to worry about that until after your college entrance exam.” I didn’t move to take the tutoring money he held out, my eyebrows furrowing.

The glimpse of a tattooed snake curled around his wrist, it was visible for only a moment.

“Well, I won’t be taking it.” Minho snapped, slapping the envelope on top of the books I held, then storming out.

“What..? What in the moons do you mean huh..?! Come back here and explain—” I started forward after him, but flinched back as the door slammed shut in front of my face.

“...Hah? This...feels like deja vu...” I muttered under my breath as I struggled with the books in my hands, trying to get a better look at the envelope.

“June..? Is everything alright out there?”

I squinted my eyes at the blurry, wispy words that donned the yellowed paper, Mrs. Anong’s words becoming a dull murmur in the background as my vision zeroed in on the unclear words; forcing my eyes to focus through the thudding pain it unleashed into my skull.

[ The fool sleeps ]

The words solidified for a split second before I looked up to the face of a young girl, her dark eyes impatient. I was disoriented, finding myself seated in front of the lone computer that the book store housed and provided printing services through.

The books and the envelope were gone.

“Hey, teach, don’t ignore me..! Mom said to get this poster printed...she also said to get an extra lesson from you too, because my last test was uh...it wasn’t that bad..! She’s exaggerating!” Chae Minji huffed, her frizzy hair puffing up like an angry crow’s feathers. She plopped down onto a colourfully painted stool and began to rock it back and forth as she waited for me to say something.

“...Are you mad at me, Jun oppa? I tried, okay? I did my best so don't be mad too...mom is so mean...”

“Ah? Oh, no! I'm not mad at *you*—uh...why the school uniform..? It's saturday...?” I felt my eyebrows furrow as I glanced at her black and white uniform, and the school bag she'd tossed on the ground next to her.

“Huh? Did you catch the crazy from the richies? It's Tuesday, I just got back from supplementary classes...see, it's dark out.” She pointed outside, where the nearest street light was casting a low glow outside the dark window.

“...Oh, I see. So I just got here myself...” I murmured as I looked down at the prim and proper office clothes I hadn't changed out of. I took a breath, scratching at my wrist absentmindedly.

“Your brother...can you tell him to come here tomorrow? We have something to talk about.”

“Huh? Wait—Minho oppa? Um...I don't know...mom doesn't like me talking about him anymore.” Minji winced, staring down at her shoes.

*Ah. I always wondered where he got the money from. I should have looked into it a bit more...if I had just...*

“...Have you at least seen him?”

“Um...he doesn't really come home anymore. Mom told him to...get the hell out of her house when he...quit his exams last year...I...*heard it*. What if she tells me to get out too...? I'm not even as smart as my brother...” Her voice wavered, and I reached out to ruffle her hair.

“Hey...you know that's not true. You're the smartest..!” I messed up her hair until she squeaked in protest, her eyes squeezed shut as she began to laugh.

“*You are my best student..!*” I said in english, getting a groan from her as she swatted my hand away.

“Don't lie..!”

It was a lie. This memory itself was a lie, because I hadn't comforted her during that time. I had been too busy wallowing in my own misery to do anything.

It felt like a sick joke that my brain was feeding me the what if's I'd tortured myself with.

What if I'd been a better teacher? What if I'd helped them more? What if I was there for them?

What if. What if. What if.



I could only think, but never did anything at all.

“Our June might be a liar but I certainly am not! And I say you are the smartest young lady...with the biggest appetite..! Now eat!” Mrs. Anong slid a platter of steaming food onto a nearby table and tapped at the rustic wood, the signal for us to take our seats and eat.

“Yes Auntie..!” She took her seat in an instant, not waiting for me to follow suit even though it was my dinner that she was gobbling down. It was a familiar sight, one that I had not seen in nearly a year.

It was strange, reliving memories of people I had distanced myself from.

*How was Minji doing now? Was high school hard for her? It must have been hard after what happened...I wish I could have helped...but I didn't. But it was for the best right? I would only drag them into my own problems if I tried to do anything...ah it's too late anyway. I can't help anyone when I'm like this. I tried to help Minho but...I must have made him feel like I was patronizing him.*

*No one wants handouts. Mom was adamant about that for our family, why would it be different for any other family?*

*Was I just being self righteous..? Ah, hah...that must be it. I only made things worse. It would have been better if they never met me at all—*

It felt as if my mind was rubbing salt into a wound, so I stopped thinking.

“Thank you for the food as always, boss...it's delicious!” I took a bite of the rice and curry and smiled at Mrs. Anong, who returned it, humming as she returned to the kitchen; most likely to start on the delivery orders she would ask me to deliver when my night shift began.

“Wah..! So good! It's not fair Aunty Anong makes you dinner every day..! I'm going to keep stealing it since a growing gal like me needs it more than some *old fart!*” Minji grinned, emboldened by the mock offense on my face at the use of the disrespectful bits of English she'd picked up.

“Hey..! *I like to think I'm quite a fresh fart—*”

“Pft—haha! No English please teacher..! My last English test traumatized me enough without your dumb jokes!” Her nose scrunched up as she laughed, but the carefree sound was interrupted by the door to the shop slamming open, the bell above it giving a shrill cry in protest.

I jolted to my feet, stepping in front of Minji and forcing a smile to greet the unwelcome guests.

“Good evening, sirs.” I said as I waved her off to the kitchen and away from the thugs that filled the small shop. One of the men—with slicked back hair and a snake-like smile—pretended to peruse the books that lined the walls before stepping up to smirk up at me, the tattoo of a snake curling around his neck showing proudly who he was.

A low ranked member of the Jeoksa, who thought himself better than a common thug.

A third rate villain wasn’t better, in my opinion.

“Where’s the hag eh? Won’t even offer us tea. Tsk tsk...such bad service...she really should sell the place to us, we’ll make use of the place!” The goon chuckled, reached over to mess with my tie as if showing a kind gesture by ‘fixing’ it.

“She should know refusing us doesn’t end well...just look at the Chae’s! It’s really sad to see that old laundromat resorting to 50% off sales...” He shook his head sadly as he glanced over at the printed posters that rested by the computer.

“Mrs. Anong doesn’t owe you anything.” I gritted through my smile.

“Hm, no? But you do.” He grinned as his hand gripped around my tie and yanked me down. My hands fisted at my sides as I kept my smile, trying not to flinch away from those cruel eyes.

“I already paid my price...and I still pay the ridiculous interest rates without complaint. The contract was that the debt is my problem and mine alone, you bother no one else, not my family, not my friends, not my neighbors. Or did the Jeoksa lose all honour—”

My words were interrupted by a slap to the face, my ears ringing as I blinked rapidly and tried to recover.

“Don’t talk shit, Park Hajoon. That smile is pissing me off.” He jeered as the men around him cackled like a flock of seagulls.

“I...then get to the point. What do you want, Viper?” I gritted out, wiping at the blood that dripped from my nose from the force of the blow.

“Haha! This nice tie...it doesn’t suit you.” He hummed as he pulled harder on my tie, the noose tightening around my neck. “It doesn’t suit a monster.”

“...What?” I hissed, my jaw clenching against my darkening vision, the splotches of white appearing at the corners of my sight seeming to spread like fog that overwrote my rationality.

“Monsters kill, they don’t work cushy jobs, they don’t get nice things, yeah? Don’t you agree?”

"I'm not a monster." I growled, my hands going to clench around his wrist, trying to pull it away from me, to loosen the noose, to lighten the truth of his words.

"Oh? Hm! My mistake then...but whose blood is this then?" Viper's eyes seemed to thin into a mockery of my words, flicking down to the blood that dripped from where I grasped him. When I flinched away, a bloody handprint was left on his wrist, a handprint from my hands, which were painted a stark crimson.

"W-what..? This...this can't be real..." My hands trembled as I stared at my bloodied palms, the world around me seeming to fluctuate and spin into a fog of shapes and colours I couldn't make out.

[ The fool weeps, for this is not the reality he seeks. ]

The words appeared in front of my face, mocking the distress, the pain, and the guilt that drowned me in a sea of scattered thoughts and phantom voices.

"Monster."

"Fraud."

"Burden."

"Roach."

"Murderer."

The voices whispered their accusations, familiar voices echoing within the confines of my mind until I slumped to my knees, the blood on my hands seeping onto the floor. The red seemed to move and shift, melding with the darkness to create a mass that loomed over my crumbling form. Small strands of gold danced through the red as if trying to frame pain as art, and it only angered me.

I looked up, meeting the red eyes of a beast, an elegant beast of pure white fur disturbed only by black stripes and the red and gold that streamed from several wounds like fountains, the spears embedded into its pure hide defiling it.

The tiger with a fox's snout, despite its wounds, stared at me in pity.

[ Sleep now, fool. Accept your fate, for you know it is a fate befitting of a killer. ]

"No...I didn't kill." I managed to croak out, every breath feeling as though I was drowning, my lungs filling with water as I glared at that beast.

[ Yes, you have. That blood is real, even if this place is not. ]

“I’m not a monster.”

[ Is it only monsters who kill? You are tired, are you not? Now...rest.]

[ *Allow me control.* ]

“NO..!!” I snarled back as the beast’s jaws opened, moving to snap shut around me. Before I could be engulfed in pitch darkness and the peace it would provide, my hands grasped the beast’s canines, fighting to keep them from closing around my head as my hands became raw and bloodied. A scream ripped through me as teeth sunk into my shoulders, but my grip only tightened, holding the beast at bay; only a breadth away from being consumed.

[ It hurts. It hurts. ]

The beast cried, the blood of its wounds spilling down to mix with my own, the torn skin of my palms mending itself only to be cut, again and again.

“It hurts...haa...hurts...”

[ The fool, he waits. To be saved, he waits. ]

“You are the fool...not me. No one will save me, not ever.” I smiled as my vision began to fade, but my grip never diminished, I would not let it eat me, not now, not until my debts were paid, not until my life was my own to lose.

[ No. Lies. Lies. Someone will save the fool. ]

“No, no they won’t. “ I chuckled, taking a shuddering breath before my lungs filled with immeasurable pressure, and I drowned.

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As the knife hurtled towards Ando’s neck, the hand that held it stuttered for a moment, as if fighting against an invisible force that kept it at bay. With a sharp inhale and a jerk of that hand, the blade slammed against the floor, the poor quality steel snapping in half to scatter and nick Ando’s cheek and the hand that loosened then let go of his throat.

“Haaa..hahh...ghk...!” Hajoong gasped for breath, the hand that had just choked his coworker going to grasp at his chest, a phantom pain rippling through every cell of his being. He felt himself be pushed off, curling into a ball on the cold floor. He only managed to stagger onto his feet moments later by grasping onto a seat for dear life.

*Is this...is it real..?*

He stared at his bloodied hand and shuddered, knowing intuitively that it was not his own blood that painted his hand.

*It's real...*

*What did I do..?*

His shaking eyes looked up at Ando from his hunched stance, feeling the dull thud of self disgust and guilt at the fear he saw in those dark eyes and the view of the bruise that bloomed around his neck.

*I attacked an innocent person...this time...*

*Haha...I don't remember...why? Why did I hurt Ando..?*

**[ A Guide's Contract**

Condition: Kill participant | Ando Natsuki |

Reward: The skill *Iron Grip* ]

Those were the words that appeared in front of his face to answer that question, but he didn't feel inclined to believe what he saw. He couldn't believe his eyes, because they lied, they had shown him lies, fabricated memories.

*How do I even know this is real..? It could be another dream.*

He raised the hand that clutched the hilt of a switchblade, the blade now halved and fractured. Then he forced his hand to let go, watching as the knife clattered against the bloody floor.

*Please. Be a dream.*

"What..?! That's boring..! Why didn't you kill him for me??" An unfamiliar voice made Hajoon snap his head in its direction, his eyes squinting behind his glasses to make sense of the white haired man who scowled at him.

"F..for you..? Who..?" He stammered out, his eyes darting around to the faces in the blurry darkness before he removed his glasses. Before he had the time to process the blur of movement, a pale hand grabbed his face as he struggled to even stay upright, the long black nails digging into his skin.

"I'm a dokkaebi..! How many times do I have to repeat myself??" The white haired man snapped, sharp teeth bared into a scowl.

“Ghk...? Aren’t they small goblin creatures...? You just look like you have albinism...” Hajoon muttered, his eyebrows threaded together in confusion. He didn’t understand what this man claimed to be, because it was common knowledge that the supernatural wasn’t real.

But then again, nothing made sense anymore. It was delusional to expect it to.

“Small...goblin? Is that a new insult? Because I’ll kill you for that—” His threat halted as his head twisted to look back at the open exit and the people who half ran, half stumbled out the door and into the frigid freedom that awaited them. Hajoon saw familiar faces leave him behind, Viencliff, Han, the stumbling man he helped, and the unnamed others that followed. Ando and Lee Hyejin were the last to leave, glancing back with uncertainty before fear and survival instinct drove them to leave this metal death trap.

“Hah..! Now look what you did...!! Do you even understand how hard it was to get this promotion...?? Now you’ve gone and lost me my first group of ants...How am I supposed to be a good guide like this?!” The so-called dokkaebi yelled out in frustration, pushing Hajoon into a seat and forcing him to sit as he tried to grasp at the monster’s wrist.

“You. Sit.” He hissed out, bashing Hajoon’s head into the headrest before taking his leave to follow after the escapees. “Stay.” He paused and pointed at Hajoon, the look of pure frustration on his face making Hajoon laugh despite the pain.

“Haha...they left me behind. Good for them...it’s rational...” He leaned back in the seat, glancing at the corpse that was his seat partner to his left. Upon seeing familiar lifeless blue eyes, Hajoon laughed and covered his face with his arm.

*I wish it was all a dream. Why can’t I wake up from this?*

His shoulders shook slightly as he tried to breath, but the biting cold only caused a coughing fit.

“Hhg..ah..hahh...”

*Get up. I can’t rot here. I don’t have the right to.*



# Chapter 6



Stopped by the mangled exit to the tram, Hajoon was struck with a question, a question that the billowing winds and snow failed to answer. As he stared down at the crumpled face of a woman whose skin had faded to the blues of frostbite, his eyes drifted to the butterfly shaped accessory that kept her black and grey hair out of her face.

Its gold finish was dyed in red.

*What could have killed Mrs. Baek so gruesomely?*

That was the question he remembered no answer to, but he could infer. From the ache of his jaw and the scratches left on his cheek from a similar experience, he made the educated guess that the culprit was the so-called dokkaebi.

*I was moments away from ending up like that...huh?*

He was suddenly glad for the glasses on his face and the blur that it cast over the carnage around him. There was only so much a man could stomach, even if he was from the Riotbanks.

Taking a shuddering breath to calm himself, Hajoon gripped his briefcase to his side before allowing the biting winds to greet him. His first step into the familiar unknown sent a stab of cold through his feet, the snow crunching under his shoes as he continued the journey step after step. He stopped only to look back at the frost kissed tram and the red that dyed its exit.

If someone had died at its doors, the bodies were long gone. All that Hajoon saw now was the fresh footprints that lead away from it and the death it held within.

*Should I try...to catch up with them?*

“No, wherever trust we had, I ruined it. Who would trust a murderer?” He huffed out a breath, half a laugh, half self deprecation.

*Hah...not that I remember who I apparently killed...but the evidence is against me. Maybe I can claim insanity in court?*

He looked up over his glasses at the night sky, blotted out by the clusters of buildings and wires that made up Hongno. From what he could grasp, there wasn't a single lit room in the usually bright and uncomfortably busy entertainment district. The wall of buildings, connected by walkways from roof to roof; were a cluster of barely legal hubs all competing against each other for relevancy. Only those who couldn't afford the cleaner alternative across the river came here, but even still they refused to walk the streets amongst the locals; hence the tacked on bridges that ruined their view of the sky.

His eyes traced the shadows of the structurally flimsy bridge between two of the taller establishments, watching it sway gently against wind that was anything but. He could have sworn he saw someone up there, staring back at him.

“Hey—” Hajoon paused as that figure vanished into a flurry of snow, which swirled, then darted to the right. His eyes followed it, blinking against the flecks of cold that gathered on his eyelashes.

He couldn’t see past the snow, and trying to was a fool’s errand; so instead he followed it. Not because he trusted the hallucination of a person to guide him, but because he didn’t have anything better to do.

From the intersection the tram had come to a stop at, he could see that the street to his right led further up the hilly terrain; so he began the trek upwards in pursuit.

There were many trails of blood along the piling snow, some being actively erased as he walked. He felt no inclination to follow them, as they would only lead to death or the recently dead. He wouldn’t look, he wouldn’t play hero, that was what he told himself as he heard muffled screams and groans of pain from an alley only a yard from the tram.

The snow that led that way was disturbed, a path of blood and struggle that deviated from the path his coworkers and company had craved through the snow. From the skid marks he saw, he could tell that from that point on, they had run.

*Walk. Keep walking.*

His foot froze before it hit the snow of the cracked pavement, his head turning to the snarl he heard from behind him, the snarl that was followed by a pained scream.

*If you stop, you die.* He screamed at himself to keep going, to turn his back and walk away, but his feet didn’t listen. Before he could think rationally, he was stumbling his way against the onslaught of snow as he backtracked towards the sound.

“AAARGH...!! S-stop...h..help..” A weakening voice became audible as Hajoon turned into the alley where the trail of blood remained despite the snow. It was because the source was there, hidden and bleeding under the assault of a girl who snarled and gnashed, her movements jerking like a broken puppet.

Hajoon stiffened, his hand gripping onto the rusted wall as he saw the damage done, the blurred sight of the girl ripping the man’s intestines out like noodles from a bowl.

He had to close his eyes as the man screamed, unable to witness a familiar face contort in pain.

“S-Someone..! You...!! Help me A-AHHG!!” The salaryman from the tram yelled out as he noticed Hajoon, seeming to not recognize him in the darkness.

*Why did I come here..? That bastard won't live.*

*What did I think I could do?*

Hajoon took a step back, but his dress shoes, unfit for treading anything but office floors, slipped. He barely stifled a yelp as he caught himself using the wall for support, but it was too late.

Bloodshot eyes had turned to him, the irises crimson as if they had drowned in their own blood. Her mouth opened into a smile, one that had likely been her livelihood in one of the clubs that infested this place.

It was disgusting, that bloody smile.

Hajoon only managed to raise his suitcase as a shield between his face and the monster's gnashing teeth, skidding backwards as he tried to stand his ground. If he fell here, it would be over within seconds. The monster would rip out his throat with those spider-like fangs and he'd die, just like that.

He let out a hiss of breath as he felt manicured nails dig into his arms, and with a desperate attempt to get away, he yanked his arms and briefcase back. He felt the skin under his sleeves tear as he swung his work bag at the monster's head, the combined weight of several novels, his abused notepad, and a stack of paperwork connecting with her face with a dull thunk.

Hajoon's breath shuddered as his mind blanked, watching as the girl, no, the monster fell to the ground. It clutched its head, which was snapped at an awkward angle as it muttered wordless gasps to itself.

Hajoon flinched as the monster stumbled to her feet, fumbling through the alley blindly before finding a wall and bashing her head upon it to fix her head back into place. She didn't look back as she limped out of the alley and into the snow like a kicked dog.

"...It left...! Ghk...ahhk...don't just stand there..! Help me damn it..!!" The man whose guts hung outside of his expensive suit called out as he clutched at his stomach.

Hajoon inhaled, pushing his glasses up to blur the gore as he stepped forward to kneel in front of the man.

"Haaa I thought that crazy woman could call an ambulance...then she turned out to be a damn monster..! Then that northerner dropped me and ran..can you believe that?? I got lucky there, you're strong eh son?" The man was smiling through the pain, but when his eyes focused on Hajoon's face, the fear and hatred Hajoon saw was greater than even what the monster had received as it actively ate him.

"You..!? Crazy fucker...are you here to finish the job..?! Get away from me..!!" He snarled through several violent coughs that spewed blood.

"S...sir, don't yell, what if something else finds us..?" Hajoan hissed through clenched jaws.

"Hah..!! Haha!! then it can eat you too..!! It sounds like the best dying wish I can get right now!" He laughed as his trembling form sagged back against the dumpster behind him.

"Ha...haha...why? What did I do for you to hate me this much...?" Hajoan let out a weak chuckle as one of his hands fisted.

"What did you do..?? You stabbed me you fucker..!! You tried to kill me with a grin on your face..!" He spat out along with a spray of blood that bubbled up his throat.

*Ah. So it was his, the blood on my hands.*

*Ha...hahaha...*

*That dream, it made me think I killed someone...but he's not dead, yet. He isn't dying because of me, right? That monster ate him, it did the most damage, not me.*

*I'm not a murderer.*

Hajoan stared at his fisted hand for a moment before standing up. Without another word, he turned and walked away.

"H...hey..! Hurk..argh...wait..! Bastard come back...!"

Hajoan ignored that voice as left the alley, his eyes set on the peak on the hill he had previously been walking towards.

"..Help..!...help...h...hel.." The weak whispers were swallowed up by the winds as Hajoan stopped by the awning of a bar at the top of the hill, temporarily sheltered from the falling snow.

The String of Fate. That was what the sign above the door read. Hajoan knew this place, because it had good soju, better rice wine than most bars, and cheap prices. He also knew that there was a telephone in the reception area.

*Call for help, yea, that's rational. I should call...*

Hajoan's fingers paused on the dial pad, letting his head rest above the wall mounted telephone.

"Who...could I even call...?" He laughed as he dropped the handset and let it hang from the cord, lightly bouncing inches from the floor but not quite making impact.

*You fool, no one would help you. No one can help you.*

*Hah...now I sound like that evil spirit in my head.*

*I'm really going crazy. Fuck.*

Hajoon felt exhaustion seep into his bones as he began to gently bang his head against the wall, the muted thuds bringing order to his raging thoughts.

*Hongno...is a dungeon now? Or is it the entire Nagwon district?*

Thud.

*Where are the monsters coming from..? It can't be people...it can't be what I'm thinking. But she...no, that monster was eating that man. Ha...ahaha...was that a zombie..? No way.*

Thud.

*The security at the bridge...it was intensive because they knew this was going to happen? Where was the damn evacuation order..?!*

The thud rang in his ears as he clutched at his chest, trying to reign in his stuttering breathing.

*I don't want to go home and find monsters...monsters and the dead...*

Hajoon was too preoccupied with his thoughts to notice the footsteps behind him, the sound of a frying pan smacking him upside the head reaching him too late to respond with anything other than a grunt and temporary unconsciousness.

"How did a zombie get in here? I'm pretty sure I locked the door...huh well, this one was weak. Poor thing." A low voice hummed as a boot nudged at Hajoon's collapsed form. A man, whose bandana held his bangs from his forehead, spun the blackened frying pan in his hand as he eyed the motionless man on the ground.

"Should I toss it outside? Or burn it? These things don't die easy..."

"Urgh..?" Hajoon grunted as his eyes winced open, hoisting himself onto all fours just barely, then staggering to his feet as he clutched the bump on his head.

"Damn, I should have burned it when I had the chance. Oh well, nothing another good thwack won't fix" The man muttered to himself as he raised the frying pan once more, but paused when the silver eyed Zombie flinched back, holding a briefcase up like a shield.

"B-burn..?? What?? Back off..!" Hajoong gritted out, his vision fuzzy with white spots as he tried to function with a head injury that would have put any normal person out of commission.

"Oh? It can talk." The man blinked, taking a step closer to peer at Hajoong.

"Huh. Are those eyes real? I should take em, they fetch a damn fortune on the black market."

"I said. Back. off." Hajoong hissed, swinging his suitcase at the man's head like he'd done to that monster in the alley. But unlike that monster, the man with dark hair and skin was fast and easily dodged his attack.

Before Hajoong could move his arm to clumsily swing again, the man grabbed that wrist. A sharp pain ran through him as his arm was twisted back and he was slammed into the wall face first. Hajoong heard the crack of his glasses between the wall and his face, and had to squeeze his eyes shut against the specks of glass that fell into his eyes.

"So bothersome...heh? The zombie is warm...?" The man let out a perplexed grunt as Hajoong struggled against his grip, only becoming more confused as he felt the pulsing heartbeat through the veins of the wrist he gripped.

"Gahk..! I'm not a damn zombie??"

"...Oh. For real?"

Hajoong's attacker suddenly let go, and Hajoong used that chance to reach for his briefcase which had fallen to the ground. He only managed to slip the umbrella free from its strap, grabbing the only weapon he had on hand to face the wide eyed man, pointing the end of the umbrella at his face.

"...You're threatening me with an umbrella?" The man's perplexed face broke into a cheerful laugh as he took a few steps back.

"You hit me on the head..! With a...frying pan..?" Hajoong's glaring eyes flickered to the blunt weapon in his attacker's hand, then behind him to the blurry view of an empty bar and dining tables. He could hear faint voices beyond the door in the back, but he felt no confidence in them helping him if he were to yell for help.

*If he tried to kill me, why wouldn't the others? How many are there...? Three? Five?*

"My bad..! Haha!" Hajoong's attacker said flippantly.

When the anger in those silver eyes didn't dissipate, his laughter tapered out. He set the frying pan down on the counter nearby and raised his hands in defeat.

"Hey...I wouldn't hurt a fellow roach yeah? I didn't mean it that way! Calm down!"

"Back. Up."

"Alright alright!" He chuckled, taking one, two, then three strides back while maintaining eye contact. "You can't blame me for thinking you were a zombie yeah? I heard the thudding and swung first! Swing first, ask questions later you know?"

Hajoon scoffed under his breath and let his hands drop to his side, using the umbrella as a crutch as he tried to shake off the buzz of pain in his head. He could feel his skull throb with a likely concussion, and could only hope it hadn't damaged his remaining brain cells.

"Oh...hurts huh? Want some ice to put on that?" The man's smile grimaced as he rubbed at the back of his head.

"Ah? The fridges still work?" Hajoon glanced at him with a grunt.

"Who needs fridges right now? Leave a cup outside and it freezes ya know?"

"Ah. So, is the electricity running or not?" Hajoon's eyes flickered to the telephone, which was still swaying slightly.

"...Hn? You have strange priorities huh?"

"Strange..? Shouldn't you have the same? We need to call the civil service department during a natural disaster..."

"Call huh? Well, we should yeah... if it was that."

Hajoon picked up his briefcase and leaned against the glass of a display window, staring at the man who rested his hands on his hips and smiled without a care. He removed his broken glasses from his eyes, blinking off the specks of glass as the darkness beyond the smiling man became clear to his eyes.

He froze as he was faced with a rifle, and a girl who leaned on a rounded table to aim it at his head.

"Don't be so stiff..! I've been truthful you see? I apologized too!" The man with the bandana took a step forward, and Hajoon flinched back.

*Something about being at gunpoint makes it hard to believe the sincerity of that.*

"Hey. I said I won't hurt you."

"Say that to your friend back there." Hajoon hissed back, his eyes flickering between the two threats in front of him.

"Oh. Ohhhh..!" The dark man exclaimed, looking at Hajoon and back at the girl.

"You're one of those..!"

"...What?" Hajoon said as his eyebrows knitted closer together.

"You can see her. I sure can't! I forgot to bring a lamp in here, haha!"

Hajoon's face twisted into a look of irritation as he stood there, watching the man laugh while his companion pointed a rifle at him.

*He's insane. If he can't see...then I could run for it, but no, he's fast. Besides, one wrong move and there'll be a bullet in my brain.*

"Haha...right. I'm a nocturnal, that's all. Not a zombie, not a monster, not even armed." He tried to appeal to the man's apparent relaxed nature, attempting to relax his eyebrows and smile.

"I'm harmless."

"Oh...I uh, I believe you, don't worry—" The response was interrupted by the girl, who stood and walked closer.

"No. He reeks of bloodlust." She snapped coldly, not once letting Hajoon be free from the threat of her rifle. From the closer range, Hajoon could make out the distinct silver emblem of the militia on the weapon, but he was forced to direct his gaze back upwards as she clicked her tongue.

"Huh? Well we all had to kill something to survive, don't be so harsh Althea—"

"Like the demons." She interrupted him again, her dark eyes narrowing at Hajoon.

The man ran a hand through his curly hair at that, pushing his bangs out of the way to reveal the grey bandana and furrowed eyebrows underneath.

"He really smells wrong?"

"Yes."



He inhaled and glanced at Hajoon again. "You. Come to the back." He gestured to the back door, from which two more figures had stepped out.

*What? So you can kill me quietly?*

"Hah...stop shaking like that. Don't tell me he hit you hard enough to make you dumb?" The girl scoffed, throwing a glare at her companion.

"Haha..! If he ain't a roach, he would have died right there! You know I have a strong swing!"

She didn't respond, adjusting the weight of the rifle onto her forearms.

"I'm not dumb enough to follow you thugs." Hajoon grit out, tasting copper on his tongue as his eyes caught a glimpse of the winding snake tattoo on her wrist.

It was the sign of a new recruit, fresh out of high school, if she graduated at all.

"Don't talk down to me. No one said you had a choice." Her eyes momentarily flared with anger as her finger tightened over the trigger. It was an awkward movement, unpracticed and impractical for a weapon model made for long distance combat.

"Don't steal from the militia if you don't know what you're doing, kid." Hajoon huffed, his lips quirking up into a sneer.

"I didn't steal..!!" She roared, pulling the trigger in a flash of blind rage. Her companion's eyes flew wide as he yelled something about noise and waking, but Hajoon couldn't hear it over the feeling of cold dread.

*I said that out loud.*

*Don't taunt crazy people, that's the one damn rule I have.*

*Damn it.*

Hajoon's blood ran cold for a moment as he watched her stagger back from the recoil, hearing nothing but the thudding of his own heart as the glass behind him shattered. His eyes shuddered before they flickered to watch the blood seep through the left shoulder of his coat. Shards of glass sprayed over him like falling snow, a precursor to the blizzard outside blasting its way inside.

His hand gripped at the torn fabric and flesh, his monochrome vision fading to black as he staggered.

*It hurts.*

[ It hurts.]

Words took to the air as he straightened up. A voice that mixed with his own until it became one.

[ Kill them. ]

The commanding words echoed within his mind, twisting with fresh pain to cement itself as law.

Hajoon's hand came away from his shoulder, the fresh crimson dripping down his palm and onto the floor. His eyes snapped to the two strangers in front of him as plumes of fog spilled from his mouth, spreading to encase his form as if to erase his presence entirely.

Althea was frozen in place, her hands shaking as the rifle in her arms suddenly felt too heavy and burdensome under the instinct that screamed to run. The air itself was oppressive with a familiar bloodlust, something that immobilized prey in normal circumstances.

"Behind you..!" Her companion pulled her aside, just barely avoiding the gnarled metal skeleton of an umbrella whose fabric had been ripped away with a bloody hand. She yelped as the metal nicked her forearm and when hurtling past her to get stuck in the floorboards like a knock off excalibur. Unlike the western tale of the legendary sword, the metal snapped in two as the silver eyed man tried to pry it out of the hole it had dug into the wood.

One moment, she could see his silhouette against the faint moonlight that spilled from the broken window; hunched over like a cornered animal with the gnarled weapon in hand. Then he was gone again.

Normally, her sense of smell allowed for her to create an accurate mental image of any person in her vicinity. Even in pitch darkness, she was never caught off guard, but this was different. Something was blocking her senses, a strong and deadly stench that overpowered any trail she could follow.

"Gh..! Hey you hot headed idiot..! Leave it and go to the back..!" Her annoying companion yelled to her, but she ignored him.

Althea whirled around, steadying her finger on the trigger and bracing for the recoil as she took a shot in the dark. The gunshot rang in her ears as she was shoved aside yet again, but this time her senses flared as she was hit with the scent of her own companions' blood.

"Grrk..! Hahh...you're really bothersome, Althea. You better be grateful you're my responsibility, although I'm starting to reconsider my promises..." He grimaced and looked back, blood flooding from the arm he'd shielded his face with. The metal edge of an umbrella was now

lodged in it, which he struggled to keep from tearing straight through as the silver eyed man who gripped the end of it glared straight at him.

There was no light in those eyes, and staring at them only made the man chuckle.

“Hey, you there? What are you, possessed?”

“No, this is a different creature entirely.” A light and airy voice mused, the tension of the air being cut through to ease the trembling of the prey trapped within.

Long and almost corpse-like fingers wrapped around Hajoon’s neck and squeezed, causing him to cough up a fresh spray of blood.

“Hm...there is no contract tied to his actions...” The woman—with flowing white hair that nearly trailed on the ground—kicked Hajoon in the back of his legs, making his knees buckle and fall to the ground.

“It seems you can’t see through simple illusion tricks...” She turned to the man with the bandana and the girl who knelt by his side, giving a bored look as Althea pulled the metal out of his arm and gripped at the gushing wound.

“Pathetic.”



# Chapter 7

From the cluttered rooftop of an apartment building, a young woman fell, her body crunching obscenely underfoot as the others of similar spider-like appearance ripped her apart, believing that she was the prey they had chased all this way. They were too slow to realize that the scent of fresh blood was second hand, rubbed off from the brown haired man who had kicked her off of the railing she had only just managed to climb over.

“Here..! Ando-ssi there’s another one..!” Lee Hyejin called out, the flame from her lighter illuminating another young face, his eyes bulging and bloodshot while his jaw unhinged with a crack to snap at her.

“Right..! I see it!” Ando Natsuki pushed her out of the way of the spider-like teeth and swung the plank of wood he had found lying in a pile of rooftop junk. It connected with a dull thud, the rusted nails embedded in the wood doing the brunt of the damage. Ando lurched forward as the zombie fell, the wooden weapon falling from his grasp and clattering down into the alley below.

Ando could see the pleading eyes of a monster, trying to replicate human emotion and fish for empathy as it clung to the fabric of his scarf to save itself from the deadly drop.

The sight disgusted him.

“Just die, monster. Don’t pretend like you feel anything—” His jaw clenched as the memory of silver eyes and a grin momentarily overlapped with the struggling monster’s face. In that moment, he lost his footing, wincing as he pressed his lower body against the railing to prevent himself from tipping over into the darkness. While gripping the cold metal railing, which numbed his fingers gradually in tandem with the falling snow, his other hand raised to his neck to tug at his scarf.

He could feel another hand gripping at the sweater he wore over his work suit, but he couldn’t help but criticize her decision to stay instead of running away.

“Let go. You’ll drop the lighter if you...”

“No, I won’t.” She hissed back, her shoes skidding across the frosted cement as she strained to keep the fire lit in one hand while pulling at the combined weight of two men with the other.

Ando begged to differ, because Lee Hyejin’s grip was weak; trembling fingers exhausted by hours out in the oppressive air of a dungeon and the snow storm that persisted. It was clear to him that she was distracted by the fear of more monsters crawling out of the shadows where the flickering light of her lighter did not reach. That was why she had obsessively clutched that lighter, unflinching as it occasionally singed her fingertips.

“Agk...hey, help me pull this off.” Ando wheezed out as the scrambling movements of the zombie below left him with excruciating pain that numbed the edges of his mind much like the rest of his cold body. He tugged at the blue fabric around his neck, which tightened like a noose, progressively choking the air out of him.

He didn’t hear her response, not over the grating scream of a man falling to his second death, taking Ando’s scarf clenched tightly in his fist.

“Hah..gh..ow my neck...” Ando rubbed at his bruised throat and stumbled away from the precarious fall he had barely avoided. His fingers paused over the purpled skin left as an impression of a hand, and his hand fell to his side.

It was an unpleasant reminder of fear, and of losing a friend.

“I told you to take the damn thing off earlier...” Hyejin huffed, pushing away from Ando and brushing back the hair that clung to her forehead.

“Ack...but it was cold, you know? Now I bet I’ll freeze to death before the hunters even get here..!”

“Will they?” She cupped the flame against the billowing winds and looked to the horizon and the silhouette of Jeokjo across the river, visible through the tangle of wires and clustered buildings.

“...What?”

“Will they really come here?”

“...Of course they will. It’s their duty to protect us from...these situations. They won’t just let this happen.” Ando frowned, his eyes following the flickering flame across the rooftop.

He darted forward to follow Lee Hyejin, his breaths fogging his narrow vision as his hand traced the railing back to the door down into what he assumed to be an overcrowded apartment building—going by the number of potted plants, junk and clothes lines he’d stumbled into in his efforts to avoid an embarrassing end at the hands and teeth of low grade monsters like zombies.

They were among the few types who would die to bullets, compared to most others where common military equipment became useless. Ando was sure he could make quick work of them if he only had managed to keep possession of that military grade pistol.

He knew it was wasted on that inexperienced cop, if he was even alive out there to use it. They had been separated from Ivan Han in the labyrinth-like alleys of the Riotbanks, and Ando didn’t have confidence in his survival rate.

“...I hope that’s true, Ando-ssi.” Hyejin’s hand paused on the door knob as a sharp exhale produced a puff of the fog-like substance that haunted her thoughts. She could almost see the breath solidify to resemble a screen, words being etched into the air.

[ Cowardly child...]

She inhaled and yanked the door open, both of them darting inside quickly as they heard the lumbering footsteps of zombies scaling the fire exit ladders that trailed the side of the building. The door was slammed shut by the weight of both of their bodies as they silently tried to catch their breaths.

Hyejin clicked the lock into place and glanced at Ando, searching for a familiar sense of reassurance she could not find. The person that served that role, although begrudgingly, wasn't here.

“...Am I...a coward?” She whispered, staring down at her hand, where a lighter sat clutched tight. The sting of pain from the flame upon her fingertip; she liked that it distracted her.

“...What?” Ando squinted at her, then paused, pressing his weight back against the door. They could hear footsteps, then the thud of something they were only a doors thickness away from; but the door nor lock budged.

Hyejin should have felt relief, but she found it hard to focus on breathing when every breath formed into words that mocked her. Ando was ignorant to the source of her deep frown and only shuffled away from the door after the thudding noises faded away, dusting some of the built up snow off of himself.

“We should...try to find a telephone, at least.”

“Hey...you look like you’ve seen a ghost.” He continued when she didn’t respond.

[ I see you...soon, you shall see me.]

Her finger trembled over the sparkwheel of her lighter, then the sore and locked muscles finally allowed themselves to move—casting them into darkness, darkness that removed those words from her sight.

“Hey..! We...um, we don’t know what’s in here..! Don’t turn it off—”

“It’ll run out of fuel quickly. We need to conserve what we can.” She snapped back, directing the frustration built by the suffocating feeling around her conscience at the man who had suddenly become unbearable.



Hyejin moved forward with false confidence, her hand tracing the wall until she felt the bump of a door frame against her fingertips. A bit more fumbling around revealed a doorknob which did not budge as she turned it.

“Hello..? Is anyone there?” She spoke, disturbing the silence that had fallen around her. Her knuckle rapped against the wood in a hesitant knock, and she stood there, waiting.

“I’m...I need help— no, I’m here to help..!”

Silence. Nothing but the awkward shuffling of Ando’s feet answered her. But she could hear it, movement behind the door which stank of death.

“Ms. Lee.” Ando suddenly spoke, making Lee Hyejin’s shoulders stiffen at the tone of his voice.

“What are you doing? Do you want us both to die?” He said, his eyes darting around in the darkness, the lack of light making his nerves stand on edge.

“What? No. If...if there’s survivors, then we should help...” her hand fisted against the door as she took a breath. The acidic stench of blood had become normal in the past few hours, as she had witnessed more of it than she had in her 26 years of life.

The pressure around her lungs and mind, it was uncomfortable. She wanted to throw up, but there was nothing left in her stomach but a pit of guilt.

“Help..? Can you even say that after leaving him there?” Ando scoffed, to which Hyejin’s fist collided with the door in a thud that didn’t quite drown out his voice as she’d hoped.

“Shut up.”

“I’m not blaming you, Hyejin-ssi. It was a good decision, rational.” Ando looked to the shadow of his coworker, someone who held themselves high now seeming to shrink back into themselves.

“I’m not so good...with making decisions. So I’m glad you were there.” He smiled, but his attempt at comradery fell short of comforting and landed to strike a nerve he hadn’t intended.

“...What is that supposed to mean?” Lee Hyejin nearly snarled, and Ando flinched. His hand moved to absentmindedly rub at his neck, silence falling again.

“...h...hello..?” The silence allowed the faintest whisper of a voice to waft from behind the door. It was a girl’s voice, a child’s voice.

“...Yes..! I’m here, still I’m here..! I’ll.../ *will* help you..!” Hyejin exclaimed, her hands trembling as she pulled at the doorknob to no avail.

"H..help me...I'm scared.." She could hear muffled sniffles, a young voice cracking from fear and pain. She felt suffocated by her own morals when all she felt was the need to run away. It would be so easy to run. She was used to taking the easy way out, but she couldn't get herself to do so this time.

"I'll get you out..! Don't worry...I...I can help..." Her fists were pounding on the door, the resulting pain numbing her thoughts during the hopeless moment where the door did not budge.

"You're...making too much noise." Ando spoke up as his eyes darted about in the darkness.

"I'm going to help her."

Ando exhaled slowly and shuffled forward, nudging Hyejin out of the way.

"Wha—"

"I can help." He said as he took a few steps back, before barreling into the apartment door. The first collision only got a creak from the hinges, and the second bruised the shoulder that bashed against the wood. The next thud rang in harmony with the snap of metal as the door wobbled and fell forward into the uninviting darkness of a small apartment.

"Ah..." Hyejin took a rushed step inside, but upon nearly tripping over the door, she paused.

"W-we're here..! Where are you..!?" She asked into the darkness, but the darkness didn't respond. She fumbled in her pockets for her lighter, the flame flickering back to life with a weak sputter.

In front of her was a wall where the door had leaned onto, and to her right was a narrow hallway. She didn't like cramped spaces—especially when they rank of mold and death—but she moved forward one careful step after the other, spurred on by weak mutterings of a voice she could barely differentiate from a wind draft that swept by her cheek.

Ando covered his nose as they entered a small kitchenette. The stench of rot was strong, and the dinner on the stove, cold. There was a smear of dried blood on the pot handle, which he avoided touching as he looked inside the pot.

"Ramen..? It's overcooked." He muttered, his stomach growling at the faint smell of msg that hit his nose. He picked up a nearby spoon and nearly took a bite of the abandoned meal to satiate his screaming stomach, but quickly dropped it as he heard a familiar scream.

"Hyejin-ssi?! What's wrong??" Ando hurtled into the small bedroom where he found Lee Hyejin was crouched and struggling against something he couldn't see. He moved to help her, but yelped when he felt cold strands of something stick to his face and arms.

“Gh...it’s everywhere...” Hyejin grimaced as she tried to scuttle forward through the spiderwebs that seemed to spread through every inch of the room.

“What is this??” Ando ripped off the wad of webs on his face and shuddered as it clung to his fingers. He let out a string of swears that Lee Hyejin didn’t understand, his hands waving furiously to shake off the webs stuck to him.

“Don’t tell me there’s a giant spider—?!”

“Shh..! Don’t say that, you’ll scare her..!” Hyejin shushed him, crawling and dodging through the tangle of webs towards the girl’s weak voice. She raised her lighter, burning away some of the sticky and larger than life spider silk; but seeing the body of a girl engulfed in the webs through which the fire spread, she frantically stamped it out, singeing her skirt in the process.

“...Hey, Ms. Lee. Put it away. The whole apartment is gonna burn down if we even..!!”

“ Stop. Yelling. I got it, okay.” Lee Hyejin snapped, her teeth grinding for a moment before she pocketed her lighter, casting them into darkness. She took a breath, ignoring the build up of webs that clung to her as she made her way through to the corner of the room—where a little girl was hiding under a table.

“H..help me...help I’m scared...mom...” The girl murmured, but her silhouette barely moved at all as Lee Hyejin reached out for her.

“I..I’m here to help you..! We’ll get you out okay? You’re safe now..!” She reassured the girl, her own hands trembling from the lack of light. When her palm made contact with the girl’s shoulder, Hyejin paused, the cold that transferred to her making her shudder.

“He...help...h..lp..” The broken voice continued to mutter, the syllables crooked and awkward.

“...Hello..? Little girl, hey, I’m here to help you..! What are you ignoring me for..? Am I scary?” She laughed awkwardly, her eyes trembling as she gave the girl’s shoulder a shake.

“*What are you doing..??* Just grab her and let’s go..!! If a monster walks in here we’re sitting ducks..!” Ando whispered, crouching beside her.

“**Shut the hell up will you..??!**” Lee Hyejin yelled, her grip on the little girl slipping as the body flopped to the side, her head resting against the floor at an angle that made it look broken.

Lee Hyejin’s eyes trailed from the shadow of her coworker, then back to the unconscious girl. Without a word, she took out her silver lighter, the first spark revealing red eyes, which then were illuminated to be the blood pooled eyes of a lifeless girl. Red streamed down to the floor like tears as her jaw moved to mouth broken words, again and again.

“Hel..p...p..l..help...m...mom–”

Lee Hyejin winced, covering her mouth as she felt bile rise up her throat. It was hard to watch, a little girl crying for her mother. It was hard to understand how that mouth moved at all, as she was long dead, and her body left without warmth.

“...Eh..? She...isn’t breathing.” Ando muttered out, holding a finger under her nose, before retreating that hand into his jacket pocket.

[ Such a cruel fate...becoming food for children of jorogumo to hatch...]

Hyejin heaved, her body trying to expel the discomfort the air itself caused. Her eyes flickered between the foreboding words and the corpse, all the while the webs that enveloped the space seemed to constrict. She felt cold, tired. She knew it was best to run. But for a moment, a thought crossed her mind.

*It’s useless.*

*I’m trapped.*

*What’s the point in trying?*

“Ugh..! Ew these things are falling on me..!” Ando hissed, flailing his arms to shake off the almost sticky strands of silk that draped down onto them.

Lee Hyejin was staring at the corpse of the girl, kneeling there as spider silk fell onto her head, mixing the black strands with patches of white. Her shoulders seemed to slump from the weight, and her head hung.

*Is it so bad to die here?*

[Ah, you see, this is how that wench feeds, luring, trapping, draining the will to fight...]

“Uh...what’s happening...? There really is a giant spider in here isn’t there..?” Ando whimpered, cowering with his hands over his head.

[Is it not cruel? Do you not hate it? Do you not want vengeance for that child? Do you...not want to burn the webs down?]

The words flickered in front of Lee Hyejin’s eyes, and she stared, at least, it prevented her from closing her eyes and relenting to the exhaustion.

“Burn..?” Her lips moved lethargically, her eyes flicking down to the sputtering flame she grasped in her hand. She could already see the webbing in the way of that flame singe and burn away, and that weak fire began to mirror the one in her own eyes.

[ Yes, burn. That contraption...it will not last. I shall grant you fire that will. ]

“You...will? What...do you mean...grant me..?”

[ **Contract of a Greedy Mask**

Condition: Take on the task of burning the spiders and their nest. I wish to see the spider's as naught but ash.

Reward: The skill *Anguished Flame* ]

Lee Hyejin raised her head, taking a breath as she read the contract in front of her face.

“Ah...Alright...” She mouthed as her swimming vision focused momentarily on the corpse of the girl.

*You deserve a proper funeral...*

Her shaking hand reached out, the weak flame catching the edge of a blue skirt that was embroidered by hand with love. Lee Hyejin watched the flowers and butterflies burn, looking away as the heat of a raging fire evaporated the tears that stung her eyes.

*I'm sorry...*

From her singed hands, fire sprang without a source, cackling laughter echoing within the smoke and ash. The fire began to spin, swirling around Hyejin and Ando's unconscious figure, until it calmed, and the trails of fire began to follow what appeared to be a mask.

[ I see you, brave child. And as such, you see me. ] The traditional wooden mask seemed to smile as the room around Hyejin burned, the fire spreading uncontrollably.

[ My vengeance...it is near. Those reapers, they will see...that I am more worthy than that wench..! Oh the fragrance of power...it's intoxicating..! ]



# Chapter 8

Hajoon woke with a sharp inhale, his barren lungs screaming in agony as cold air filled them at last. For a long moment, he could not see, even as he stumbled upright from the couch he had found himself in. He sat there, clutching at his chest and willing his body to breathe—a morning ritual of sorts, except it was not morning, and this was not his room.

Worst of all, he was not alone.

“Oh, you’re awake!” A familiar voice came from behind him, almost sending him to an early grave as he scrambled off of the couch.

“Whoa..! You’re skittish! But hey, means you got energy yeah? That’s good!” The man with a bandana chuckled, walking over and reclining on the couch without a care for his newly bandaged arm as he sat in front of the man who had inflicted that wound.

“It’s a damn miracle you didn’t bleed out dead! No thanks to that trigger happy idiot, refused to even heal you, said she’d rather kill you—can you believe it? Honestly, you scared her good I bet.” He continued on without any input, wincing before raising his legs and propping them on the armrest, creating a makeshift bed out of a couch that was much too small to fill the role.

Hajoon’s eyes flickered to the man’s arm, the memory of his own hands driving a damn umbrella into it flashing through his mind. It was ridiculous, and it couldn’t possibly have happened. But unlike the time in the tram and the accusation of murderous intent he’d received, there were flashes of faded memories in his mind to prove his guilt.

*Ah...not again.*

*No, I shouldn’t feel guilty. He attacked first. It was self defence.*

*But I stabbed him with a damn umbrella..? What the hell is wrong with me..??*

“Hm? Ah this?” The man’s eyes flicked from Hajoon then down to his bandaged arm. “You sure did a number on it! Althea said the bone’s broken, and some muscles got a damn hole ripped through em! It was so bad so she passed out asleep after healing it...but I betcha i’ll be swinging good as new in a couple days!”

“...Ah. I...see.” Hajoon frowned, his back pressing against the door as he stepped back. A fresh throb of pain erupted from his shoulder and he reached towards it, but felt his left hand get dragged along with his right.

He looked down to see that they were tied with a coarse rope, one that was commonly found binding product deliveries to crates.

“Oh right, hope you don’t mind that? It’s for safety and all, not that a rope would do much if you’re really what she says you are. Hey, at least we didn’t kill you right?”



“Hey. Stop glaring at me, I’m being nice and explaining here. Could have kept my mouth shut instead, you know.” He huffed, his incessant smile falling for a moment.

“...I was shot. Now you say you’re being nice?” Hajoon hissed, gingerly clutching his shoulder which stank of fresh blood.

“Yea, I’m being too nice to you, fucker. You made me damn useless..! Now I have to sit here and hope one of them doesn’t toss me to the zombies for being a burden..!” The man snapped, covering his face with his good hand while the other seemed to tremble. He took a few visible breaths as Hajoon shuffled to prod at the doorknob, testing whether it was locked or not.

“Just open it man, it’s not locked.” The man’s dark brown eyes darted to stare at Hajoon through the gaps of his fingers, making him freeze where he stood.

“Hey. The names Vayun.” He smiled slightly, his hand falling back to rest over his chest.

“Just Yun is fine...So?”

“...What?” Hajoon squinted at Vayun, the lack of his glasses making it hard to discern the details of the man’s face.

“Come on..! Are you slow—Uh, what’s your name..?”

“Ah, just—Park.” Hajoon returned the smile he could barely make out on Vayun’s face.

“Wha- that’s a common ass last name..! There’s another Park just down the hall—”

“It’s my name. It’s all you’re owed.” Hajoon interrupted, fumbling with his bound hands to open the door and hurry out, minding his step so that he didn’t look nearly as panicked as he felt. Turning a corner, he made his way down a darker corridor, the shadows allowing him to see, even if just a little bit better.

*Where is this..?*

*Where’s my glasses..?*

*I can’t see for shit..! Is this still the bar?*

*It’s too bright, it’s at least midday...*

Hajoon paused as a wave of repulsion went through him, as if his body itself refused to go any further into the winding hallway. He could see the doors that lined the way, and they were perfectly normal save for the fact that this bar had never known that the String of Fate bar had

rental rooms. He hadn't considered that so much space existed behind its small lounging area, and it was stranger still that the owner never rented these rooms to earn a quick fortune.

He couldn't find proof to justify the feeling, but something felt *wrong*.

[ I sense something...unnatural. What have they done...? ]

The tiger's voice confirmed his worries before fading away into a dangerous silence.

"I wouldn't go that way if I were you." A hand clamped down on Hajoon's injured shoulder and he had to bite his tongue to stifle the pain.

"The girls claimed this hall. I wouldn't be surprised if you set off a booby trap of some sort by wandering around." A bearded face smiled, turning Hajoon around and walking him back to the room he had escaped from.

"Now I suggest you sit down and stop bleeding all over my floors." The man with a sailor's accent huffed as he took a rag from a cabinet and wiped off the blood that Hajoon's wound had left on his hand.

"Your...floors? What?" Hajoon glared at the older man, scanning that face for any relation to the owner of the String of Fate bar. They were wildly different, the stern man in front of him and the friendly owner from his memories. Besides the lack of relation, Hajoon found it highly unlikely that the stubborn old man had handed off ownership to the bar that he had often bragged about being in his family line since before the calamity period.

"Yes, my floors, my roof, my bar, understood?" The man frowned, taking a step forward, to which Hajoon took a step back.

"What...did you do to Mr. Choi..?" Hajoon's jaw clenched as he fought to keep the stabbing pain of his shoulder out of his face.

"Heh..!" Hajoon heard a small laugh from behind him, catching Vayun grinning as he cast a glance at the bearded bar thief.

"We actually did that walking corpse a favour, right boss? Put him out of his misery like he asked heh..!"

"*Don't* run your mouth, you hapless thug." The so-called boss snapped at Vayun, a vein above his eyes throbbing as he barely restrained his anger. He took a breath, pinching the bridge of his nose before gesturing for the deflated Vayun to get up.

"You, go fetch Athea." He huffed.

"It's Althea—" Vayun corrected, but one look from the bearded man shut him up.

*"You heard me."*

Hajoon watched the door open, then close, leaving him alone with a man whose eyes held no patience, not for discussion nor humour. He had already strained the thin rope of patience, and walking across it now would be a certain fall to his death.

*These people killed Mr. Choi. Why? To take over a run down bar? It wasn't a popular place, there's no profit to be had. Did he have some kind of debt I didn't know about..? And the Jeoksa are here to collect it..?*

*Did business get that bad here since I last visited..? It's been what, six months?*

*"I told you to sit down."*

Hajoon found himself sitting back on the couch, his eyes flickering away from the angry eyes of the man who pulled a chair out from a nearby table to sit in front of him. His gaze dropped to his hands, useless in rope that he couldn't even attempt to bite through in fear of repercussions—even as blood from a previous wound seeped through his ripped sleeve and down the hemp fibers.

*Why haven't they killed me yet..? What are they planning to do with me..?*

[ You should have killed them when you had the chance, fool. ]

Hajoon inhaled but tried to keep his face neutral as that damn voice growled in his mind. He didn't feel inclined to listen to it, because every time it appeared, it led to blood, and to problems.

[ Even with my aid, you accomplished nothing. You remain pathetic..! Is this my punishment, being stuck with a useless husk of a vessel? I cannot believe this. Do not just sit there you fool..! Another one of those pests are approaching— ]

Hajoon grit his teeth to drown out the scolding rambling with the grinding of his own molars, an act he often did in the face of the egotistical types who just seemed drawn to him. He was used to getting scolded for so much as breathing wrong, so he wasn't phased, not by some hallucinated voice in his head.

[ Do you...not hear me? Have I lost my chance..? No, not again. I won't be stuck in this hell, suffering, reliving. No, I won't let that happen— ] The voice crackled like a disturbed radio signal when going through a tunnel, then fizzled out completely as the door creaked open.

The temperature of the room immediately plummeted, Hajoon's breaths puffing like smoke as he squinted up at the blurry face of a woman whose smile seemed to suck the light out of the room.

"You're here, Miss guide." The bearded man gave her a nod, his own breaths seeming to stutter for a moment before his eyes steeled again.

"Ahh...just call me Yuri. I'm just a Yurei after all. Really, there's no need to be formal, gramps."

"Gramps—?! I haven't even hit 50 yet—" He sputtered, exasperated at the woman who only smiled softly as if she had not said something ridiculous.

*Yurei? Hah...really? First some fake dokkeabi, now some rude ghost? She doesn't even look scary...*

Hajoon's eyes flicked to the elongated fingers, and the sharp nails that came from dull skin. A memory of those hands around his neck flashed across his mind, and he quickly changed his mind.

"Hello..? Mr. Jongsen? Yun said you asked for me?" A girl stepped out from behind the overflowing white hair of the ghost woman, her expression immediately souring as she saw Hajoon seated a few feet away.

"Heal him." Jongsen, a common mispronunciation of Jonson, looked over at Hajoon while he was making that observation.

"What..? But he—"

"You watch your tongue, girl."

"...Sorry." Althea murmured, her eyes downcast as she walked up to Hajoon.

Hajoon returned the grimace on her face as his hand went to hover over his bleeding shoulder protectively. Three others filed into the small room, crowding around as if to block his view of the door, and the only exit. Vayun was the only one Hajoon recognized, and he didn't know how that boded for him.

"Althea...do this for me, hm?" The Yurei took a step closer and smiled at the girl who shuddered in response. "There's something that I want to check."

"...Fine, okay." She huffed, taking a breath before rolling her sleeves up and stretching her fingers.

"Oi, unc, open your status."

*Unc...? Uncle...?? This little shit—*

“Hah...? How bout you try speaking sense huh?” Hajoon scoffed, unable to hold in his distaste.

“I speak plenty sense, you’re just dumb in the head..! Crazy bi—”

“Hey- hey stop that Althea..! Stop picking fights..! Boss ain’t in a good mood...” Vayun grasped her shoulder for a moment, backing off only when her glare became directed at him.

“Ugh...” She grumbled to herself before she focused on her wrist again, inhaling, then exhaling.

“Open status.” She said, her words drifting from her lips in a wisp of fog to form a screen in front of her.

“See? Like this. It’s simple. Now do it.” She gritted, not giving Hajoon even a second to process the game-like screen displayed by her head.

[ **Participant: Althea Reyes**

PN: 1442 8747

Type: Demihuman (Non-citizen)

Class: Mender

Age: 18

HP: 88/125—

]

“Get your eyes off it or I’ll pluck ‘em out.” Althea hissed, covering the rest of the details with her hand.

“Haha...that...was that a status window..?” Hajoon’s eyebrows knitted together as he glanced over at her furious face.

“Yeah, obviously.”

“But...that’s from rpg games?”

“Uhuh. Like from Fantasy Hunter.”

“That...makes no sense...” He laughed incredulously, his voice weak as his wounds began to throb in beat with his heart.

“Ugh, that’s because you’re old. Makes plenty sense to me.” She rolled her eyes, but her gaze darted downwards as the soft chuckle of a monster ran through the room like goosebumps.

“Did your guide not explain this?” The Yurei appeared by Hajoon’s side, having suddenly sat down next to him. He felt cold sweat trickle down his furrowed brows, but he couldn’t manage to speak through the pressure of her proximity.

“Here...focus on your heartbeat and do as she did. Show me your heart, show me what you are...” She whispered as her knobby hand wrapped around his neck, the tip of a long nail pressing against his pulse.

“Open, status...say it.” Hajoon saw white, pain stabbing through him as if a nail had been driven into his neck.

“O..open sta- status.” He wheezed out in hopes to quell the pain.

That breath took to the air and formed his own status window, the air rushing back into his lungs as the ghost released his neck.

**[ Participant: Park Hajoon**

PN: 1300 0000

Type: Chimera(Pseudo-citizen)

Class: Trickster(?)

Age: 26

HP: 25/70

STR: 11            INT: 52

VIT: 20 (+15)    AGI: 15

Skills:

A fools mask    ]

“Ahh...there it is. Hm...how fun! I’ve found something that wasn’t in the training manual!” The Yurei hummed in delight, her blank white eyes squinting at the so-called status window.

“So...Chimera, are you?” She turned her gaze to the wide eyed man who surely felt nothing but dread in the face of her curiosity. “A creature stitched from the corpses of many...if I remember correctly. I wonder what part of you is...you, and which is something else entirely...”

“...All of me is me.” Hajoon managed to speak, his mind running a mile a minute to process the information in front of him.

He couldn’t understand what he saw, because it wasn’t logical. In fact, it was almost comical, seeing his personal information displayed as if he was a character in a rpg.

*What kind of joke is this..? Is that my damn ID number? Hhaha..!*

Hajoon heard the Yurei laugh, soft and restrained. “You are you...are you so sure? The concept of you, the concept of me...it’s more fickle than you expect.”

Hajoon didn’t respond, and she simply smiled wider.

“Well, I’ve confirmed it! Park Hajoon is a Chimera!” She declared to the audience that circled around the couch, the total number having increased by one—a short haired woman who clapped for the Yurei—fanfare that her boss didn’t seem to take kindly.

“This isn’t a damn theater, stop that.” Jonson hissed at her, then directed his glare at the white haired spectre. “What in the moons is a Chimera? You told us not to kill this roach...should I be reconsidering your advice, little Miss Guide?”

“Oh, not at all! He’s very useful, like I told you!”

“*How* is this cretin useful?? I’m not in this game to pick up baggage left and right..! Why should I just do whatever you say—”

“Because you have no choice.” Her voice raised for a moment, and a ripple of pain seemed to permeate through the faces in the room.

“Ahh...but I’ve been very helpful, as a guide should be! Isn’t that right, gramps?” She smiled, and the pain disappeared like it was never there.

“...Yes, right.”

Hajoon could see Jonson’s face redden with barely constrained anger, and for a moment, he indulged in wondering if the man’s anger issues had accelerated his aging; but a thrum of pain from his shoulder brought him back from that musing.

“Hrk..! What are you—” Hajoon gasped, pulling away from the hand that had grabbed his injured shoulder without ceremony.

“Healing you, so stay still damn it..!” Althea grabbed his shoulder again, her fingers digging into the tender flesh without a care for the pained swears that spilled out in response.

“The bullet barely grazed it, so stop acting like you’re dying ya damn chicken.”

*Says the one who shot me...!*

Ow. Fu—

“Urk...let go, you’re making it worse...” He hissed between his teeth, his jaw clenched against the pain as a burning sensation began to flare up under her hand.

“No I’m not. See. Look. Your HP, the number here, it’s going up.” She pointed at Hajoon’s status window, and his eyes narrowed as he tried to make out the small letters and numbers.

[ HP: 28/70 ]

*What...? Did it change? How is it even...tracking that?*

[ HP: 30/70 ]

“Your wrists should start healing too, but I’m focusing the energy here so don’t complain if it leaves a bad scar or something.”

Hajoon stared at his shoulder, and the hand that grew more veiny and monstrous the longer it stayed there, beginning to resemble that of the Yurei. He could feel the bleeding stop, the skin around the wound flaring with pain before eventually numbing.

[ HP: 41/70 ]

His eyes flicked from his status window to the movement he noticed by the girl’s head. It was her status window, the numbers that represented her health depleting as his own was replenished.

[ HP: 72/125 ]

[ HP: 68/125 ]

[ HP: 63/125 ]

“Stop staring. This is just how it works okay? I’m not explaining.” Althea grumbled, taking her hand away and hiding it in her puffy jacket.

“Equivalent exchange, it’s the foundation of a mender.” The Yurei explained, seeing the confused look on Hajoon’s face. Objectively, it made sense. The fresh scar tissue that had formed over his injuries forced him to acknowledge that fact.

“I did what you asked, can I go now?” Althea turned to Jonson, to which he gave a curt nod.

“Rest, we need at least one of you to be useful for the next mission.” He said gruffly, giving a pointed look to Vayun and his broken arm.

“And *you*,” The man’s glare turned to Hajoon, making him wince. “We’ll see if you’re useful, or if I’ll have to *make* you useful as monster fodder.”





# Chapter 9

Gurgling cries in the distance, and electrical wires swaying with the gale-force that swept in from the old Busan Bay to the east; that was what Hajoon could make out from the rusted window to his right.

It was a small window, one that even a child could not fit through, much less himself. So he sat there, watching the blurry landscape of concrete and snow whirl with the fresh stench of smoke in the horizon.

Something was burning nearby, and the faint tendrils of its destruction stung his nostrils.

*Hah...I want to go home...*

*Is there even a home left to go back to..? I don't know...*

“So...Yun said you're Park?” The woman with the bob cut poked at his shoulder, successfully getting his attention by sending a wave of numb pain through his half healed wound. He hissed in a breath and gave her a tightlipped smile.

“Ah...yes.”

“He's Park too..!” She pointed at one of the two unknown men, who then waved in response. The smiling man's bangs were chopped haphazardly like the work of a child, but other than that, there wasn't much to notice about him.

Not that the blob of features was anything to notice. Hajoon was only a few steps away from blind without his glasses.

“Park Sanghyun.” The blob spoke, extending a hand which Hajoon did not shake; because he couldn't. He gestured to his bound wrists and the blob just gave an understanding “ah”.

“Hehe...who knows! Maybe you two are long lost twins?” The other, slightly more detailed blob (due to proximity), grinned. She seemed nonchalant to the irritation that radiated from him, which only pissed him off further.

“Haha...I'm not sure about that.” Hajoon chuckled, leaning away from her as she casually invaded his space.

“Yeah, he's better looking than our Park.” A blunt comment came from the other nameless blob who was sitting and sharpening what looked like a kitchen knife.

“Oh yeah, he kinda– Wait..? Hey..! Are you calling me ugly Chen??” The other Park's volume spiked suddenly, making Hajoon wince.

“Mh, you made that assumption. Means *you* think you're ugly.”

“Gh...” Park Sanghyun frowned, an expression Hajoon could make out despite the low resolution due to its comical intensity. “Don’t bullshit me...”

“Ay ay! Stop fighting, you’re both ugly! I’m the only pretty one here and you know it!” The woman gestured to herself grandly, which Hajoon flinched out of the way of.

“Yeah yeah, noona.” Park Sanghyun muttered, leaving the room in a huff. Hajoon watched the door creak on its hinges, squinting for movement outside of it to no avail.

He couldn’t try to bolt, no matter how his muscles twitched with the instinct to do so. He couldn’t risk it, not when he couldn’t tell what these people would do. They were crazy, and at the very least, thugs. Hajoon knew well enough not to mess with thugs.

“Thoughts, Yun? Cast your vote, but the only option is me, of course!” She turned her grin to Vayun, who had been napping beside Hajoon for the past half hour or so. Hajoon wasn’t adept at noticing the passage of time during the day, so he hoped it hadn’t been longer than that.

“Hn..? Just you? What’re you on about now...” He yawned, then stretched, making Hajoon’s shoulders stiffen as a two side assault to his personal space was carried out.

“She wants an ego boost, like always. Bet you don’t know that huh new guy?” The man with the knife paused, pointing at Hajoon. He felt cold dread as he stared down a butcher knife, freshly cleaned but undoubtedly well used. It was the type that could easily take a limb off with a single swing; like the giant squid they’d chop up down at the Wharf.

“...I...haha...how would I know..?” Hajoon laughed awkwardly, his fingers twitching where they rested on his lap.

“Wasn’t talking to you, other Park.” Chen huffed, taking a step forward to point his knife directly at Vayun.

“What do you even know huh? Here for a quick buck aren’t you? Makes me wonder why Viper dropped your useless hide here with that rare healer girl. We need her to fix that broken *thing*. But what do we need you for?”

*Viper...?*

*That bastard...wasn’t he low ranking? This doesn’t sound right.*

*Fuck. I don’t want to stick around to find out what that snake bastard is trying to do.*

“Wha— hey, maybe you should stop frowning so much, you’re getting wrinkles. Also, you should know, Althea would be dead if I wasn’t there last night. This guy was out for damn blood..! You’re the one that was out wandering around looking for ‘meat’ to cook or whatever it is you—”

“You ate breakfast, didn’t you? You have no right to complain when you eat *my* cooking like a leech.” Chen hissed at him, stabbing the knife into the plush of the sofa beside Vayun’s head.

“Ay..! Stop that you guys..! You’re scaring the prettier Park..! What if he gets ugly like our Park because of you huh?” The bob cut woman placed a hand over her mouth and gasped. It didn’t seem genuine at all, her eyes slanting up as if she was enjoying this.

*They’re crazy. All of them.*

*I need to get out of here—*

“Ay..! Stop biting that..! It’s not going to work you know—” She grabbed at Hajoon’s wrists, but as she did so, the rope tore away, and he spit out the piece that had snagged in his mouth.

“Don’t touch me.” He snarled, his teeth baring while he clutched at his chest. It was hard to breathe because he was panicked, even more so because he hadn’t taken any medication. It was still in his bag, and that old leather thing was nowhere to be seen.

“Wow...hehe...those are impressive...” The woman took a step forward, and he stepped back, falling back into the couch with a huff. Hajoon could feel his blurry vision fry at the edges as she grabbed his face and prodded at his fanged teeth.

“Are these like werewolf teeth or more vampire...hm...both are extinct by now right? Nawian hunters love killing those...Bloody moons, they’d pay millions for fangs like these—” She murmured, and Hajoon snapped his teeth at her, making her let go and take a nonchalant step back.

“Ay, Yun, how much do you think they’d sell for?” She gathered her bearings and turned to Vayun, who glanced over as if the knife by his head was no big deal.

“Eh, not much, we can’t prove it’s legit. But look at his eyes, those would sell for 10,000pax minimum!”

“What..? But those are just plain old brown, don’t lie—”

“No I swear they were the clearest silver I’d ever seen..! You just didn’t see them last night—”

“Why do people keep—! I’m not a damn vampire—” Hajoon covered his mouth and his eyes snapped to Chen, and the knife he pulled from the couch with a grunt.

“...Mn, should I carve them out?” The sharp eyed man deadpanned, sliding a palm across the knife blade to clean off the feathers stuck to it from the couch wound.

“WHAT?? NO??” Hajoon scrambled back, nearly falling over the top of the couch before the cold window glass caught him. For a moment he thought of smashing through that glass and falling to who knows where, but then he remembered that it was barred, and far too small for that to be possible.

“Whoa, calm down there..!” Vayun said as he grabbed and pulled Hajoon to plop back on the couch with his good arm.

“Lay off it Zhichen. You keep pushing this guy and we’re all dead.” He cast a quick frown at his armed companion, stepping between the glares being exchanged.

“Huh..? The hell? Are you saying you think he’s stronger than all of us here? You got a screw loose?” Zichen snarled, pointing his knife at a new target.

“Hehe...Chen, don’t you get it? The little guy is scared cuz he’s a weakass! Try to calm down yea? Would be sad if you actually got wrinkly at 23!” The crazy woman laughed to herself before resting an arm on Vayun’s shoulder, an action she had to raise onto tiptoes for even with the thick heeled boots she wore.

“Weakass—?? You try getting stabbed by a damn umbrella, May..!” Vayun sputtered, his good hand hovering over the bandaged arm protectively.

“That’s the point, Yun-ah! I would never get stabbed by a stupid umbrella! Hehe..! It’s actually so ridiculous, I thought you pissed off Chen, got stabbed, and lied about it!”

“If I did it, I’d proudly tell you.” Zichen huffed, his attention turning to the group of freaks that Hajoon wouldn’t be surprised to learn had escaped from a circus.

“Pfft– Yeah I know, you crazy! Honestly, you always have a vendetta against the cute, harmless types. Why? Cuz you’re mad you’re not cute?”

Hajoon heard Zichen huff in response, but didn’t wait to hear more, making his way to the door while they were all distracted with each other’s insanity.

He let out a sigh of relief as he reached for the doorknob, twisting it. But before he could do much else, it flung open, smacking him in the face.

“Ghk..!”

“What’s all the noise in here..?? Althea’s trying to sleep..! And we can’t wake the— Oh!” The voice squeaked as Hajoon grasped his bleeding nose and pushed past her into the hallway.

*Where's the door?*

*Where's my bag?*

*Hah, I can't stop for that, let's just get out first—*

A whizzing sound flew past his ear as he was pushed forward by unknown hands, and he wobbled before glancing back. Where his head had been moments before, there was an arrow lodged into the wooden wall.

Blood dripped from his nose and down his sleeve as he stared at it, watching as the arrow splintered and fell away only moments later.

"Oh no..! You ran the wrong way..! So sorry about that! I um, I made sure it didn't hit you though...!"

Hajoon craned his head back to stare at the soft spoken woman, who stepped back and muttered something. He heard some kind of mechanism crank inside the wall, then a stunned quiet fell over the narrow hallway.

*Booby trapped. Ah. The exit isn't this way.*

"Just kill me."

"What..?" Her eyes flew wide and she shook her head. "Why would I—"

"Why, do you like torturing people, is that it? You crazy Jeoksa bastards just love driving people crazy don't you?" He scoffed, wiping his bloody nose and flicking the excess blood to the side, which splattered on the wall.

"I'm not...I'm..." Her eyes flicked to the floor, and silence fell again, broken only by his panicked heartbeat.

"I...used to work here, at the String of Fate. It's me, Hana, Jung Hana—"

"Hah...haha, must be nice, killing your boss and helping some thugs steal the place! Who doesn't daydream about killing their boss right?? Oh you must be rolling in their filthy money huh??" The volume of his voice rose with every staggering breath he took, and he felt the edges of his consciousness fray. He didn't know why he was yelling, but the vaguely familiar face in front of him made him angry; because it felt like a betrayal of the somewhat pleasant memories he had of this place.

“You..! You say that like I had a choice..! Mr. Choi he—he deserved it..! Did you see what it’s like outside..? Do you know what happened to the other girls..?! Do you think I can survive out there alone??” She screamed back at him, her words sobbing and angry. He could hear the gears shifting in the walls in response, several arrows being fired into the wall beside him as if to declare her anger.

“I’d rather die than work with *them*.” He gritted out.

“Them who? Us? Damn...see, Chen? You scare off the cute ones I swear..!”

In his frustration, Hajoon hadn’t noticed the four thugs gathering behind Jung Hana, not until they started fighting amongst themselves again. He didn’t listen, because he didn’t care to, but he couldn’t move either, because he didn’t dare to.

*Is there a way out..? Why isn’t there a way out..?*

*This is too much.*

*Ah it hurts.*

*Where’s my bag damn it...even just one pill...it’d make this hurt less...haaa...’*

“Urk...” He tried to breathe, he really did, but his heart and lungs weren’t the type to listen to him.

“June...? Are you alright..?”

His attention snapped to Jung Hana’s face. His expression must have been intense because she flinched.

“Ah- I didn’t mean to offend you but, we’re the same age so it’s fine right..? To um, be informal?” It seemed she had gotten the frustration out of her system, as she was attempting damage control; a necessary skill for anyone who worked in Hongno.

“Do you know me?” He hissed out between clenched jaws.

“Well- yes, you were a regular back when you were—”

“No. You *don’t* know me.”

“Don’t you...remember me? We didn’t speak much but it’s not like we were on bad terms...”

“I don’t know you. And you don’t know me. That’s not my name. You mistook me for someone else. Understood?” He said firmly, leaning down to meet her eyes. He had only presented her



with a polite smile, so he didn't know why her lip trembled, a preamble to the stuttering breath she took before nodding slowly.

"Wow...that's some strong blood lust! Althea was onto something huh? I really thought she was just making things up for attention, but I guess not!" A cold breath touched his ear and he flinched, greeted by the bemused face of a white haired ghost.

"Ms. Yuri..." Hana stammered, trying and failing to smile.

"Your little outburst weakened the defence, so...?" The Yurei trailed off, smiling expectantly.

"I-I will set up new traps..! O- of course, it'll take half the day but--"

"Then do it. You don't want my help to go to waste do you? It's only my curiosity that allowed for this...experiment." Her voice was cold, much like the air she brought with her, but that coldness clashed with her sudden warm expression. "Really, you lot are lucky! Any other guide would have reported to the reapers and had the whole place razed to the ground!"

*Experiment...? Reapers...?*

*I knew something was wrong. They...they've made something here. What is it? Is that why she's so interested in me being a...Chimera...? I...I'm not some kind of, stitched together creature am I?*

*...Forget that. What if this means they've made some kind of...monster? Something like a chimera, something unnatural...*

*A reaper, a Jeoseung Saja, wouldn't allow something like that.*

In the folk tales that were refurbished as bed time stories, the grim reapers were often punishers, the divine retribution for going against nature and the natural order. Hajoon remembered his distaste for a particular story, the Fox and the Mask, where a fox was punished for daring to live a human life. It was a tragedy, because the reapers made it so.

Even still, that was just a story. Hajoon laughed at himself for suddenly remembering it, because it wasn't real. Reapers were a myth, just like the ghost in front of him.

Hajoon wasn't sure if he was going insane, but it was becoming increasingly likely as his fear changed into a strange taste of excitement in his mouth.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself!" The Yurei, who called herself the very creative name of Yuri, smiled at him. It seemed he'd been too engrossed in his own thoughts to notice that the conversation had fallen silent. All of their eyes were on him, and he didn't like that.

“Ah...haha...” He chuckled awkwardly, covering his mouth and glancing at the blurred faces of the onlookers. He couldn’t tell what their expressions were, but he could imagine well enough.

He thought they were crazy. They thought he was crazy. It was only fair.

The attention made him queasy. He really wanted to disappear, but unfortunately that was impossible.

“Gramps is out surveying...so I should get the kids to do something too right?” Yuri clapped her hands together, drawing the attention back to herself. She was looking expectantly at the sharp eyed man who stood off to the side, his scowling face now half hidden behind a cloth mask.

“...I looked around that bus crash area last night. Lots of loot I didn’t pick up. Lots of corpses too, should be good for training.” Zichen relented, pushing off the wall he was leaning on.

*That...he means tram 23. Hah...training? How? Next they'll say the corpses turn into monsters...*

Hajoon felt his gut twist, because he didn’t like the idea of his theories having real weight outside of heated debates on the forums he frequented.

“Perfect!” Yuri smiled, then pointed an elongated and dangerous finger at Vayun, who’d come out to see the commotion. “You, stay with Althea and protect *it*. The rest of you are getting a new...how do you call it, Quest?”

“Ohhh yay!” The freak with the bob cut clapped.

Her enthusiasm wasn’t reciprocated by anyone.

# Chapter 10

The tram wasn't very far from the bar, so the walk there was brief and uneventful. The sun was high in the sky, and unlike the usual cloud cover that filtered its rays into rain, the snow covered terrain only reflected the light like a magnifying glass.

Hajoon remembered the experiments his classmates would conduct on his notebooks when they got their hands on something like that. The smoke that lingered in the air as he looked back at its source several blocks inland, it fit the results of concentrating the sun's power onto something fragile like paper.

"That fire is supernatural! You're right! Good job!" Yuri's sarcastic voice was accompanied by her face, which appeared in front of him suddenly. He nearly slipped on the snow, but managed not to embarrass himself.

"But you won't survive going down that way! At least, not yet!" She continued, turning him away from the view of the smoke, and the strangely unscathed building that was its chimney.

"So that's why boss went with that damn soldier instead of us?" The other Park huffed more of a complaint than a question as he squatted behind an alley wall. Hajoon supposed it was a stealth maneuver of some kind, but he could attest that their chatter was loud enough to alert anything in the vicinity.

Yuri didn't respond, simply smiling, which earned a scowl from the man.

"Ay..! That 'damn soldier' brought guns! Quality firearms are hard to get around here you know!" May exclaimed, making Hajoon flinch and look around frantically for the zombies the volume should have brought running to eat them; but there was nothing to see. Not that he could see much under the bright sun. Everything melted into everything else, leaving only a mess of shapes and colours for him to try and decipher.

"...Hey, on that note, why couldn't we bring guns for this?" The masked Zichen raised a good question, to which Hajoon would prefer no answer as the idea of these freaks running around with firearms was frightening to say the least.

"It's cheating! You won't learn anything by shooting everything that breathes, or in this case, not breathes...hm, well either way, if I say no guns, then no guns. Got it?" She trained an unmoving gaze at Zichen, and he simply nodded after a moment.

"Alright! So today, the goal is to train your new skills! May, you'll be working on your weapons. Zichen will train his tracking, Sanghyung...well, brute strength still needs training to develop, just watch your temper. And last but most importantly..." Her long nailed hand gripped Hajoon's sore shoulder, and he had to grind his molars to keep his mouth shut.

"I want to see what a Chimera can do. Don't disappoint me, because my interest is what keeps you alive."

*Haa..? Just kill me then. I'm just a guy, there isn't anything special I can do.*

Hajoon simply smiled, to which she chuckled, a disgusting sound by all measures.

"The rules are simple!" She continued, patting his shoulder before taking a step back to address everyone. "You have two hours to train. I'll give you free reign to do whatever you want, but you better stay near me, for your own good. Oh right, everything in this area is free game to kill, except me, of course. The more kills, the more rewards, you know how it goes!"

Before anyone could protest her rules, she vanished like a fading breath, only to appear at the roof of the tram they had been staking out.

"The timer starts now! Not...that I have one of those windup kitchen timers to check but—let's just hope that this quest system can do math, because I can't!" She laughed, but Hajoon didn't particularly find it funny.

\*\*\*

**[ A Guides Contract:**

Conditions:

- Successfully use and hone the skill *A Fool's Mask*.
- Gather loot or whatever.
- Bonus points for showing me something interesting!
- Current Kills - 0.
- Time remaining: 1 hour, 56 minutes

Reward: Maybe a new skill, or maybe I'll answer one burning question you have! Good luck, *June*. ]

Hajoon looked down at the screen that floated by his hand with disdain, watching as it followed his hand as he shook it every which way in an attempt to get rid of it. Of course, it wouldn't disappear just because he wanted it to, and he simply had to come to terms with that.

"Do I have to do this...? Can't I just run for it?" He muttered to himself as he watched the others stalk their way towards the tram from his hiding spot in the alleyway.

He remembered this alley and the man that had died in it. There wasn't anything left of him, no bones, no clothes, nothing—as far as Hajoon was willing to look.

Had he hallucinated it? Maybe it never happened, that scene of a person eating another person. Maybe that girl was just a girl, and not the monster he had hallucinated. A person didn't have spider mandibles, so it made sense.

But the blood was there under his shoes, melted into the snow. He couldn't deny that.

But blood was always there, that was the nature of the Riotbanks. Maybe he had seen a stabbing and his mind had come up with a far worse explanation to what he saw? Was he that sick in the head?

He could only laugh at that, a sound muted by his hand as he looked to the sky. It was grey, with a tint of red that was only seen during the summer solstice—the seven days of sunless skies. Some celebrated the Blood Moon Festival, some called it blasphemy, jeering at those who followed the traditions of a fallen cult.

A cult with no name—forgotten or wiped from memory—Hajoon didn't particularly care. What he did know was that summer was long gone. The sky couldn't be any shade of red in the middle of the day.

It was simple, really. He was hallucinating.

Was this even the same alley? He couldn't know. The blood was everywhere, any alley would have proof of the waves of death that had struck the Riotbanks on a random workday. But was it proof of the specific death he remembered? Was it proof of his guilt?

*No. He was half dead. I couldn't have saved him.*

Hajoon looked towards the woman who sat on the roof of the tram, her white hair moving like a living thing against the southward direction of the wind. She held no resemblance to the dokkaebi from the tram aside from her hair, but they were clearly monsters of the same caliber. The kind that watched death with rapt interest, then guided those below them for their own entertainment.

*She calls herself a Guide, is it the same for the dokkaebi? I don't remember...*

*If I humour the idea...then what exactly is a Guide meant to be? Some kind of cursed tour guide? Did they decide the damn entertainment hub was too boring and turned it into a horror themed tourist attraction? What's the point if all the potential tourists just die when they step foot in here?*

*What's next? Selling zombie keychains? What's the end goal here? How can anyone make money off of this? Why would the militia allow a whole area to become monster infested right next to their beloved city?*

*There must be something here that's valuable to them. Those freaks talked about some soldier bringing firearms, which means the militia is helping the Jeoksa? With what? And why?*

The militia was strict with who gets permits, as well as what type of weapons were allowed to be sold outside of their own circles. It wouldn't make sense to arm the local mafia to the teeth, because then they become a threat.

*Even dogs can bite the hand that feeds them.*

*Dogs...actually, where are they?*

Hajoon looked back into the dark corners of the alley, watching for moving shadows or the scrape of paws against cement. But there was nothing, startlingly so.

*They always hang around the alleyways, even in Hongno. They do stay away from the crowds since bars pay the alley sweepers to kill any that tarnish the expensive eyeballs of their customers. Haha...it's actually kind of funny, but they have to at least pretend to be high class establishments considering the rich bastards that show up to throw money at a pretty smile.*

Hajoon let out a dry laugh and dusted himself off, a useless gesture considering his only good shirt and shoes had been stained beyond saving in a single day. He had to grasp at the wall and the occasional protruding piping as he made his way further into the darkness that granted him sight.

He blinked for a moment, taking in the rusted pipes and back entrances to who knows where. Generally, what he was doing would be considered trespassing and breaking and entering. One wrong step into the wrong alley and you'd be struck by a self enforced fine or a fist that decided to deliver justice that day. It's what happens when space was limited, and laws were convoluted—some drunkard having a bad day could interpret the law as an excuse to beat their grievances into a poor unsuspecting fool.

*I really hope there's no one in here...*

"Excuse me...just coming through. Definitely not trespassing...or stealing...haha..." Hajoon muttered to himself as he wiped his sullied shoes on the rug, then followed the faint scent of food that had drawn him here.

Even if his sense of smell was dulled from living near the sea of fish piss, the one thing he could reliably track was food. Even if that food also smelled like fish, he was hungry, and he was going to find it.

*Come to me fish...dried fish, salted fish, fried fish, fish curry...*

### ***Fried Squid***

*Crunchy, chewy, spicy, filled with cheese...*

Hajon gulped, feeling his stomach growl as he thought about old man Ly's specialty squid skewers, then every fish dish he'd ever tried; which was around a hundred at least, not that

each one was all that original. His thoughts eventually shifted to fruit, and the vitamins his body so badly craved; but alas, fruit was a luxury in fish paradise.

*If I can get just one mango...damn, it's like a miracle drug to me. I'd feel so much better so fast—*

His footsteps finally stalled as he rounded a corner, finding the source of the fish stench behind a table.

A person. A corpse.

A monster.

Skin scaly, fingers webbed, black hair wet as if drowned. Something about that frostbitten face was familiar, not because he knew him, but because he'd seen those cold blue eyes. The cold eyes of a Nawian man whose corpse was all he was acquainted with. He had been long dead before the numerous bullet wounds had scarred his face and chest.

He hadn't had those scales, nor gills when Hajoon had seen him just last night.

"Bloody moons...Why is my theory right? Please stop being right..." His voice wavered as he covered his mouth in an effort not to gag.

*This can't be right. People can't turn into monsters like that. If it was me, I'd understand, because I'm only half human. But him? A full blooded Nawian? That can't be right.*

*How did he get here? Through the alley? Is this a zombie like that girl? But she had spider features...this one is like...a fish? A drowned fish? Why are they different? A reanimated corpse is a zombie, that's the terminology, but what if that's wrong? I don't remember details about it...damn it. I should have paid attention to Ando's rambling...*

He took a step back, trying to clear his mind of the vivid death that the dark room seared into his eyeballs. It was gruesome, tendons and bone structures splintered by oozing bullet holes that had no rhyme or reason.

One, two, five, seven. He didn't know why he counted. He didn't know why he picked up the silver bullet shell by his feet; But he did, and the cold metal pressed against his palm before he dropped it into his pocket.

A shaky breath in, a tense breath out.

Breathe in, breathe out. Ignore the smell, that rancid stench of rotting flesh.

How had this stench been mistaken for food? How could he have possibly thought—



He stopped his thoughts, stopped breathing; for just a fleeting moment where his eyes followed the trail of blood from the corpse to the door.

There was a smeared trail of blood along the floor, as if the corpse was dragged—before or after his second death? Hajoon couldn't be sure. Hajoon couldn't be sure of anything, because he'd waltzed into this place without noticing anything at all.

He couldn't help staring at that face, because it seemed almost purposeful, the disfiguration. But the reasoning for that wasn't up to Hajoon to decide, because his thoughts were already spiraling out of control.

*Who...shot him? The soldier those freaks mentioned? Or Zichen? He said he was around here last night so it could have been— But why? For fun? A grudge? Revenge? No, that doesn't make sense, none of them know this guy. Why would they— Who else could have..? Who else has a gun? A gun..."*

The image of a military grade pistol, holstered under a black coat, flashed across his mind.

His thoughts froze in an instant as he felt cold metal press into his back. It was the muzzle of a gun, he knew that, because it was round, hollow, and very real.

"Don't move." A voice rasped, sounding as if they'd drowned themselves. Even so, Hajoon knew who it was.

"...Mr. Han."

"I saw you with *them*. *Jeoksa scum*." Ivan Han hissed with misplaced disgust, the gun giving a shove forward to dig into Hajoon's coat and between his shoulder blades. It was cold, uncomfortable, but not deadly.

Why did Hajoon assume this? Because Han hadn't shot yet despite having no reason not to. Because this model of pistol had the standard bullet capacity of seven, and Han had wasted it all on a corpse.

"Ha...trust me, I hate them more than you ever will." Hajoon scoffed, his hands fisting at his sides.

"Why in the burning hells should I trust you?? You were suspicious from the start. They were right, you were working with that damn driver..! Bringing us all here to die so you could reap the rewards and play hunter..!!" Ivan Han snapped, his finger tightening on the trigger with a click. A mistake, because it didn't fire; simultaneously confirming Hajoon's theory while throwing out the advantage of a bluffed threat.

Hajoon used that moment to push away from him, grabbing the nearest object off the table; which happened to be a candle holder.

He held it out like a knife, a poor quality, dented, and perfectly useless one as Han stepped forward. Under the fedora, the previously neat appearance was thrown asunder, his black hair stuck to his forehead in cold sweat, blood dried by his chin, and eyes crazed.

It was a mirror of himself, and Hajoon felt a prickle of sadness for the man.

Hajoon's feet shuffled back until he stepped on the musty limb of the corpse, and had to stop his retreat due to a sudden wave of revulsion.

"You *shot* him." Hajoon accused, his eyes focusing on Han's blue eyes; which looked more dead than the eyes of the corpse by his feet.

Hajoon saw the man's steps falter, then delusion set into place as he shook his head, pointing the useless gun at Hajoon's face.

"No. I didn't kill Nikolai. You did." He said as he glared down the barrel of the gun.

"...Hah? What? Do you hear yourself—"

"*You* brought us here. That driver and you...you killed my partner. **You killed my best friend..!!**"

Hajoon's skin bristled at the yelling, not because he cared for the crazed man's accusations, but because he heard footsteps behind him. It was a limping and awkward sound, followed by a click and clack noise, like hooves against cement.

*Another monster. No one knows how to keep their damn volume down damn it..!*

"Shut up..! Neither of us has a working weapon, do you want to die with me huh??" Hajoon hissed, trying to get away from both the approaching zombie and the deranged man who'd attracted it. He looked to the short hallway he'd entered from, but before he could run in that direction, a hand fisted on his shirt collar and his back was slammed against the nearest wall.

"Ghk—!" Hajoon winced as a clutter of decorations—an aunties collection of figurines—tumbled off a shelf, the edge of that shelf and the table underneath digging into his hips and shoulder.

The shrill noise of the weak, and likely fake porcelain shattering echoed through the cramped space and within Hajoon's ears.

"That's right. You should die. I'm going to **make** you die, **you godforsaken giraffe..!!**"

The northerner's voice was just another thing that rang in his ears, a painful volume he immediately moved to get away from. The candle holder bashed against the side of the short man's head, just as a fist flew and connected with Hajoon's jaw.

It took him a moment to steady himself, grasping the edge of the table for support with one hand while the other bashed the newly dented metal into his stunned foe repeatedly. Hajoon's nose was bleeding again, because another punch had hit him square between the eyes. He was suddenly glad that his glasses were missing, because the force of that fist made his ears ring.

"Just die...!! **Die. DIE ALREADY.**" The fists kept on coming; and Hajoon was used to that. Upon a closer look, as it hit him again, he noticed that Ivan Han was injured, deep scratches having ripped the sleeve of his expensive coat to expose red.

"Hrk...a zombie attack?" Hajoon muttered, his eyes flicking to the figure that had stopped its approach just behind the corpse.

He had expected to see another zombie there, but he was wrong. It was a woman, her ashen hair tangled and her expensive shoes painted red.

She was no zombie, the shrill shriek that punched through his ears was evidence enough of that.

**Veincliff.**

"**WHY THE BURNING HELLS WON'T YOU DIE?!**" Han snarled, his fingers scraping down the wall by Hajoon's neck with the disgruntled crunch of wood giving away. But Hajoon didn't care, even as a spray of spit hit his swollen cheek as the yelling continued.

It was a sudden thing, the anger that flooded him at her presence. He knew it was misplaced, like the rage of the fists that pelted him; but having that name, Veincliff, was enough to justify it in his mind.

*It's your fault. **Veincliff.** It hurts because of you.*

"**JUST DIE—**" Han suddenly stopped, his fist frozen in midair and straining to collide with Hajoon's face, but unable to because of the black clawed hand that held it back.

**"LET GO—!!"**

Han's snarling was ignored as the air pressure around them grew; an effect caused by the presence of a 'Guide'. Hajoon felt that idea to be true, because his lungs stalled right on que.

"I finally found you, ant. You sure don't know how to listen do you?" A white haired face appeared over Ivan Han's shoulder, and even through the haze of anger, pain, and fog, Hajoon recognized him.

A monster. Or more specifically, the dokkaebi that had killed Mrs. Baek. He was sure the creature could crush Han's wrist like he had crushed her head, in fact, he expected to witness it this time; but nothing of the sort happened.

"You know, when I said stay, I meant *stay*, not run off and replace me, okay?" The dokkaebi said, his grin twitching with barely restrained anger.

# Chapter 11

"How—?! How did you find us..?" Ivan Han's voice hushed in an instant, his shaking eyes meeting the squinted eyes of a monster whose cold chin rested on his shoulder.

"You're really loud." The monster said simply.

Ivan sucked in a breath, his bloodied fist going limp in the monster's hold. He could feel it, the same unnatural strength that crushed a skull, squeezing around his wrist.

"You know, I almost lost track of you two too last night. Thanks for coming back this way! I'm real happy you came back to me, I promise I'm the best Guide around! I won't even kill you...! Even if I really want to..." The monster grinned, then stood back to its full height, which was only a few centimeters above Ivan.

"You..! It's your fault this...*creature* found us again..!!" An accusatory finger was pointed in the darkness, its owner limping back on broken heels. "You were meant to contact the hunters..! A-and get me out of this hell..!! What kind of officer cares more about saving a corpse than me..?!"

"Why in the name of god did you drag a corpse here...? Y-you even...you made me help you drag it...saying its still alive...now there's more monsters here..!" Sophia Veinclair covered her mouth, her breaths stuttering as the monsters in question turned their heads her way.

"My fault? You're saying I should have left Nikolai there to rot...? How dare you say that, you *witch*" Ivan's stormy eyes met hers, the polite facade that had guided her thus far vanishing like a mirage.

Sophia's lips quivered, words dying before they found freedom in the suffocatingly cold air.

"Boooring..! So boring." A groan from the white haired monster shattered the tension, the broken pieces digging into each of their minds. Ivan stumbled as he was shoved aside by the disgruntled monster wearing a paperboy hat, squinting against the faint light of a closed window to watch it help the man he had just been beating back to his feet.

"This is worse than village drama..! At least they plan elaborate revenge schemes for stealing their rice wine..."

"Haa...revenge, there is nothing quite as sweet." The tall figure staggered, then wiped at his face, wincing at the bruised state of it. "Ah, ah, that hurts. You have a strong fist, enough for him to run from the pain, straight to me. Haa...my host is quite pathetic!"

"Host...? What?" Ivan's jaw set as he did his best to watch the silhouettes every move. He knew he was at a disadvantage, being unarmed. He also knew that that man was not normal, he had witnessed the violence, and had no inclination to being strangled or stabbed at the drop of a hat.

He watched the taller man inspect the candle holder in his hand, before glancing at Sophia and smirking. Before she could shout a complaint about his rudeness, he had lobbed it at her head.

Sophia shrieked as her hands covered her head, ducking just enough for it to miss her face and thud against her left hand; leaving an angry red welt as it clattered to the ground.

“There we go..! From the tension that just left my muscles, I can say that that was definitely what he wanted to do.” He stared at his own hand with contempt for a moment before flexing his fingers, unbothered by the stunned silence of the others.

“I didn’t want to come out just to endure this fool’s pain *for* him? What an annoyance. That level of hatred to force me out, just to throw something at a woman’s head? At the very least stab her, honestly.” The man ran a hand through his wavy hair, sighing as his fingers pressed against a bruise on his cheek next.

“You...I’ve felt this presence before. Something’s different from before...you’re not that ant?” The dokkaebi finally spoke up, pointing a clawed finger at the taller man, whose eyes seemed to flicker red for a fraction of a second. It was invisible to the mortal eye, but to the dokkaebi it all but confirmed his suspicions.

“How astute of you, little dokkaebi.”

“That...that’s cheating..! A participant is supposed to be one mortal soul, not two in one body—” He started, but his jaw clamped shut against the raw bloodlust that emanated from the shadowed face above him.

“I do not bow to the rule of the Jeoseung Saja. I am a *punisher* in my own right.” The angry snarl of a tiger nearly drew a flinch from the young dokkeabi, but the fox-like laugh that followed eased that tension. “Haha..! Well, it has been quite some time since I last prowled the mountains. You seem young, your speech is not from my time...I cannot expect you to know of me!”

The dokkaebi returned the Punisher’s smile with a nervous chuckle, fidgeting with the edge of his cap. He was used to being treated like a child by the geriatric demons that made up the roster of guides; but it was not often he met a Punisher, because Reapers do not speak to low level guides like him.

The dokkaebi was cautious, because Reapers were creatures of law and order. For a demon to claim to be of the same caliber, but refuse to follow and downright worship their rulebooks; it was strange, because it was something Reapers would not allow.

Reapers of the new rule also did not refer to themselves as Punisher.

The dokkeabi decided that the man in front of him was simply lying. He couldn't be anything more than a minor demon. Possession wasn't impossible after all.

But in the case that he wasn't lying, it was best to let his superiors know.

"Yeah..! Ahaha...so Punisher..sir! Would you please come with me to—"

"You will **not** report to them. **Understood?**" A hand clasped over the dokkaebi's mouth, nails digging into the skin that a mortal should not be able to touch. He froze in place out of pure bewilderment, his eyes wide to the face that malformed above him. Sharp jaw, bleeding nose, tired eyes wincing shut from bruises; these features shifted like fog, collapsing in on themselves to spread outwards like a festering parasite. Slowly the tendrils threaded together, forming a large maw of teeth and bone; an incomplete horror made flesh.

The cage of bone snapped around his head, but he didn't so much as flinch.

"You tryina scare me?" He squinted at the red eyes that lay beyond the thick layer of fog and illusion, his claws scraping against the browned skin of the mortal hand that dared to muffle his voice.

"I **died** stuck in a well of **corpses**, you get me? Then I spent the next hundred years cleaning a fleshy **pit**, just to get here." The dokkaebi's grin widened, the silence filling with the grating sound of his teeth grinding together; until one chipped, and he spit it onto the ground.

"You say you're a Punisher? What a joke. Whatever's left of you is *lesser* than a lowly bottom dweller like me."

He watched as the fleshy maw fluctuated, then spasmed, phasing out like a weak breath. A barely conscious face looked back, a wince following a weak laugh.

"Kids these days...so hard to please."

The dokkaebi snorted at that, then paused, his grin falling like melting snow.

The room was empty, his ants gone; leaving a door that swung in the wind.

"Shit— Not again..!" He shoved the staggering mortal aside, his body flickering like a weak candle, once where he stood, then vanishing to appear by the door before he ran out into the daylight.



## //Chapter 10

The freedom of the open skies, or whatever small bits of it he could see through the snow and wires, greeted him with disdain. The winds that pelted him were frigid, and his freshly healed wounds ached as he trudged after the backs of the scouting team that held him hostage. As they rounded the corner of an alley and down into another, Hajoon had the thought that now was the time to run—to vanish into the white veils of snowfall; but the gloved hand that rested on his back prevented him from testing out that thought.

“Watch your step. Your fancy shoes are useless out here.” The owner of that hand huffed as he steered Hajoon around the frozen mess of snow, cement, and blood. He didn’t complain as he was yanked around, because he was too blind to do any better for himself.

“Ack— Ah...thanks, Park-ssi...” Hajoon chuckled, feeling quite awkward to call another by his own name. He would have used the other Park’s first name if he could, but he couldn’t remember it, nor did he want to.

“Uh— ew. Cut the bullshit and just call me Sanghyun.” The man with the choppy bangs made a face, which Hajoon just barely saw as disgust due to its intensity.

“Haha...right. Sorry, Sanghyun.” Hajoon winced as he was pushed to climb up a set of stairs. He gripped the handrails, which were dented and rusted, and—as he climbed further— missing in chunks along with the occasional missing step. The suffocating stench that burned into his mind grew stronger as the group passed over a horde of zombies in the street below. They seemed agitated, and all headed north along the river bank

“Don’t lose him now Sangie..! It’s slippery so watch where y’all are walking yeah? You Parks should stick together hehe!” May turned her head to shoot a grin their way, but nearly slipped through the cracks in the metal staircase as if karma struck her in record time. She saved herself by clinging to Zichen, who swore in a language Hajoon didn’t recognize.

“Keep your wits about you..! This is not the time for chit chat.” A gruff hiss came from Walker, the leader of this hapless party, who promptly jumped down to the street below. His footwork was light, practiced; it was clear he had been here before and planned out the best route forward.

“What’d he say? Wit chit?” May asked over the howl of the wind, her voice trailing off as she jumped down after him.

“Don’t ask me, I don’t speak posh.” Zhichen huffed as he vaulted over the railing, hanging off it for a moment as the stairs shook on unsteady foundation, before dropping down.

“Ugh, jump already. I don’t want to get left behind cuz of you.” Sanghyun pushed Hajoon forward, his shoes skidding on the metal as he scrambled away from the edge. He could hear them, the groaning of zombies only a few feet away. Jumping now would be the same as throwing himself into open maws, but his choice was made for him before he could protest.

“Ghk—! Fu—” Hajoan yelped as he plummeted, landing hard on the cement. For a moment, it felt as though his spine had snapped in half, but he managed to stand, ambling after the distinct chatter of May who never quite stopped talking.

“Stop overreacting, it’s not like roaches even feel pain.” Sanghyun scoffed as he grabbed Hajoan’s coat again, pushing him along into a light jog after the others.

*Pain tolerance doesn’t mean no pain, you twat.*

*Haa, that stupid idea is what got my medical claims rejected. Even if they can see with their own eyes that I’m in pain, the classification of what I am takes precedence.*

Hajoan ground his teeth and took a breath, trying to pace himself as the running became arduous. The longer he ran, the harder it became to hear anything over the sound of his own gasping breaths and struggling heart. When his aching legs finally found relief in a back alley at the foot of a building whose drab but normal appearance contrasted with the smoke that billowed from an open window somewhere on the top floor.

It was as if the building was untouched by fire, but Hajoan’s lungs protested that notion as the distinct stench of burnt flesh forced its way inside.

“A fire that burns flesh, not wood and fuel...” Hajoan saw the ash haired man look up and smile as a shadow fell across the alley. “It’s still burning on the top floor. Follow me, we’re heading up.”

“Uh— up there..? Ew, my lungs are itchy just thinking about it.” May pinched her nose as she begrudgingly followed the Amarcian soldier who led the way. Walker had pulled up a mask to his face, a military grade ventilator that kept his lungs safe while the others coughed and did what they could with scarves and scraps of cloth.

Hajoan covered his mouth with his hand, biting back coughs as speckles of red painted his palm.

“Ugh it’s worse than the fish market, at least rotting fish is edible...” Sanghyun added to the mumbled complaints as the group made their way up the stairwell, Hajoan lagging behind as he clutched the wall and willed himself forward.

“Doesn’t even smell bad, stop complaining.”

He saw a hand scratch at the window behind the door to floor 2, the darkness of a smoky interior allowing his eyes to see the fingers that left lines of blood along the glass.

They were pale, and thin. Most notable was the lack of burns or injury. If this was a survivor of the fire; they were very lucky.

“Help me...it hurts...help..hel...” He heard a voice as he stopped before the door. The hinges creaked, and Hajoon reached out, his fingers pausing around the cold doorknob. His ears noticed the fluctuations in pitch, as if the voice struggled to choose what to be.

The grainy voice of a man at his wits end, the sobbing pleas of a terrified child. The creature behind the door was neither and both at the same time.

“Open the dhor...door...” It tried to speak more firmly as the door knob wriggled, then shook.

[ It's a pathetic creature. A simple mask given life. ]

Hajoon didn't like the input, but it gave him reason to rationalize the smirk that stretched his own lips as he held the doorknob still.

This creature, it was like him, he could feel it. A shifting presence, and something that pulled at his mind. Finding kinship in a monster, it was a strange thing. But its weakness gave him a strange satisfaction.

“Help? Why should I help?” He laughed under his breath as a wooden mask pressed into the glass, hollow eyes meeting his. The wood fluctuated, a desperate but flawed attempt to change from bark to flesh. Several mangled faces flashed through, a fearful man, a crying child, before it paused on a poor imitation of a woman's face.

Hajoon didn't like how he could put a name to that face, because it made his smile hard to rationalize.

“You abandoned me first, Hyejin. Why the hell should I help you?”

[ Don't entertain it. It only imitates what it's seen. Let us kill it. Better yet, let me eat it. ]

*So Hyejin was here. If this thing saw her, then...*

*She's probably dead huh? Ah, I don't want to think about it.*

He paid no attention to the blood that trickled from his nose, nor the coughs that worsened in intensity as he stared the creature dead in the eyes.

“I...am hungry.” It said, before a string of words took to the air.

[ **Contract of a gluttonous mask**

Condition: Free me from this place. Let me eat.

Reward: I will not eat you. ]

“Pfft— haha...no. You can do better. You have her face, at least pretend to have a shred of her misleading legal skills.” He laughed, wiping at his bloodied lips.

“If I had my notebook I'd just draft a better one...” He muttered as he tried to focus his bleary eyes on the words that fluctuated as he was lost in thought.

**[ Contract of a gluttonous mask(draft)**

Conditions:

- ❖ Participant | Park Hajoong | will aid the contractor in exiting this area. Further aid not agreed upon is not enforced by this contract.
- ❖ Participant | Park Hajoong | will not hinder the contractor in its attempts to sate its hunger. He will guide it, and the contractor is required to follow his guidance.
- ❖ The contractor | Gluttonous Mask | is not permitted, under any circumstance, to harm or consume Participant | Park Hajoong |.
- ❖ If and when this contract is breached, a penalty is enforced. This penalty is agreed upon by accepting this contract.

Reward: A partnership of kin. ]

*Hm...it's messy, and a load of bullshit, but at least this way it can't eat me.*

He ran his fingers through the foggy contract, then winced, coughing into his palm.

*...Huh? Why is it actually there? I thought it was just in my head...*

[What...did you do? I feel drained. What did you take from me? ] The tiger's voice complained in Hajoong's tired mind, the words echoing and melding with his own thoughts as he watched the face beyond the glass return to its wooden state and twist into a modicum of fear.

“You...how...? Are you a...reaper...? If a powerful being would help me...then I accept.” It nodded.

“...Reaper?” Hajoong muttered, disoriented as he found himself kneeling on the ground. He was still holding the doorknob, and with a twist of his wrist, he let go.

“What the hell are you doing..? Oi, get off the ground.”

Before he could tell the annoying voice to piss off, he was yanked to his feet by the scruff of his coat. He tried to shove Sanghyung off of him, but his eyes blacked out for a moment as if seeing through a mask.

“Ah...? What..?” Hajoong grasped at his face, trying to pull off something that—to the eyes of his audience—wasn't there.

“Ugh...freak.” Sanghyung muttered, his face scrunching at the sight of the taller man hyperventilating. “Why’d that Amarcian guy put me on babysitting duty? Who the hell is he to boss me around anyway...damn guy showed up last night and expects to run the joint...” Luckily, his complaints were out of earshot of Walker, who had led the charge upstairs and out of sight. Unluckily, he had attracted attention from the short and decidedly stuck up man he called brother, if only in name. The resemblance was nonexistent, as it often was with who Sanghyung called family.

“You’re lagging behind again, Sang. I knew the job was too hard for you...” Zichen laughed behind the scarf he’d used as a mask, his concern faux, as it always was.

“No— What?? It’s not..! Not my fault!! This guy is such a damn pain to lug around..!” Sanghyung shoved Hajoong forward, who stumbled and managed to lean on the wall.

“I hear excuses...hn? Oh, huh. Looks like the smell is getting to him.” Zichen stared at the blood spewing from Hajoong’s nose, glanced down at the heaving chest, then sighed. “You didn’t give him nothing to filter this shit, can’t blame the guy for dying on you.”

“You’re blaming me now, Hyung..?? Shut the hell up—”

“Stop freaking out, it’s annoying.” Hajoong felt Zichen’s voice grow closer, and looked over to see him ripping off a half of his scarf, shoving it at Hajoong.

“Hah..? What did you..” Hajoong rasped out as he looked down at him through bleary vision.

“Not talking to you.” Zichen cut Hajoong off, tossing the cloth at him and jogging his way up the stairs and out of view.

“Oh course he was fucking talking to me— Oi..! Chen..! Say that again to my face so I can punch you—” Sanghyung yelled as he stormed off after him, leaving Hajoong disoriented and alone.

Hajoong stared at the brown cloth in his hands, then grit his teeth and wrapped it around his nose and mouth as a makeshift mask.

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Walking through the narrow halls of the top floor, Hajoong was often distracted by movement at the edges of his vision, even though the backs of the only people in this building were right in his line of sight.

Maybe it was the claustrophobia, getting to him. But that explanation was weak, because narrow spaces were the norm in the Riotbanks, and he was well enough adjusted to find comfort in the lack of space.

He chose to blame the smoke next, not because it stung his lungs, but because the leader of this so-called scout team was heading straight towards what looked to be the source.

“Hrk— you hear that? There’s something screeching down there..!” The heel of a hefty boot came down on the door that billowed smoke like a raging dragon, the owner of the thick heeled thing brandishing what looked to be a pair of daggers as the lock broke and the door creaked on its hinges. She seemed delighted at that, filing after Walker, who pushed through with his rifle at the ready.

The soldier’s chiding order to be silent was obeyed in part as they made their way into the eye of the smoky storm, its intensity leaving most eyes stinging, and some weeping. Hajoon raised his arm to shield his face as he glanced at the strangely emotional face of Sanghyung, then shifted back as a scuttling mass charged from the fog.

He saw numerous legs, then a set of malformed mandibles gnashing, not at him, but the teary eyed man next to him.

Blood splattered, and a shot fired. Hajoon felt the warm liquid drip down his cheek as he ducked back and out of the way of a flailing appendage. His back hit the wall, and he felt a cold shudder at the tongue that licked at that blood, because it wasn’t his own.

“It’s...delicious. I want more...you will help me get more won’t you?” A faint whisper brushed against his ear, but when he turned his head, there was nothing there.

*Disgusting.*

*What did I...what kind of monster am I helping...?*

[ A creature of gluttony, feeble things. Ah, right! This time you cannot blame me! Hahaha...! How fun! Enjoy the fruits of your choices, fool. I know I will. ]

“Sanghyung..!” Two voices yelled into the chaos, blades glinting in the wisps of light that filtered in through the smoke. But their panic was unwarranted, as the man under the thrashing spider was alive, while the spider soon wasn’t.

Hajoon could see the flames burning away at its flesh, leaving chunks of its body to crumble and fall away as Sanghyung gripped it by the mandibles and rolled it off of him—crushing it into the wall to quiver, then fall to a pile of ash.

Walker pushed a foot through the ash, digging through until a silver bullet casing caught the light.

“*Mercy of light*...what a waste of a bullet.” He clicked his tongue before turning to the burning mass the spider had appeared from. The injured man got not a glance from him, which was a

dubious decision in terms of morale—what with how the others glared at their so-called leader before helping their companion limp out of the room in search of air that didn't burn their lungs.

"You, come here." Walker suddenly looked back at Hajoon, who had been frozen in place with indecision. A moment passed in silence, before the idea of a bullet to the head spurred Hajoon to step forward through the curtain of smoke.

It took him a moment to see the cocoons, then his eyes drifted to the webbing that spread out along the ceiling and walls. It was some kind of network, which was burning from the outside in, the threads of silk following the web back to its center.

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"There's nothing here..! Whatever you're looking for probably burned up too, Wacker." After around two hours of being forced to rifle through the soot and ash, Sanghyun finally snapped. He jumped to his feet too quickly, the burnt metal pipes of the sink he had been crouched under drawing a scratch along his arm. He hissed as blood trickled onto the blackened bathroom tiles whose patterns were indistinguishable.

"*Walker*. Micheal Walker. But you may address me as sir." The ash haired man said through clenched jaws as he pointed his rifle at the glowering youth. It was a threat, Hajoon was sure, but the soldier didn't put it to action, lowering his rifle.

"And what we are looking for is an item, like I have said many times. An item that stands out, and is unscathed. An artifact, in a way."

"Like this?" May chirped, trotting over from behind a busted wall with something cupped in her hand.

"Oh..! You have found something?" Walker's voice took on a modicum of excitement as he leaned over in anticipation as she slowly opened her palm.

It was a lighter, its silver casing sparkling in the light that spilled in through the burnt window blinds. It was intact, undisturbed as if the fire that had ravaged the space had spared it entirely.

Hajoon felt his stomach churn, his ears buzzing as he looked at the familiar object.

*It's...hers.*

"Yes..! This is exactly it! Good work, runt!" He snatched it from May's hand and began to inspect it, moving towards the window for better lighting.

"Runt...?" May muttered, then followed after him along with the others.



“Finally..! I was dying from the damn smell in here...” Sanghyun complained as he fixed the makeshift mask he wore. He was right, the stench of burnt flesh was strong, and nauseating.

“So...what does this thing do?” Zichen asked, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms.

“You will see soon, just shut your mouths and let me work.” Walker warned as his thumb pressed on the sparkwheel of the lighter. For a moment, nothing happened, then a spark lit, and fire combusted from the small metal body like the breath of a northern dragon. It was lucky that he had not pointed it at anyone present, because a part of the wall and window burned and blew away into ash.

“Glory be to his eternal light..!” Walker exclaimed, an almost groan of pain hidden behind his prayer as the others jumped back to avoid being burned. He released the lighter only when it had burned through his thumb. Even Hajoon could see that his thumb was missing, the bone of the joint sticking out in stark white against his black gloves.

It fell to the ground, the floor around it beginning to melt, the shape of a small square being carved into the cement.

Hajoon didn’t hear the cacophony of noise that erupted from that point on, crouching beside the lighter and reaching out for it. He didn’t quite touch it, because he was afraid of being burned, and of being correct in his assumption.

*No...it can't be right..?*

“What...is this?” He murmured, his mouth feeling clammy as his breath swept forward as smoke in the cold aftermath of fire. The buzzing in his ears only increased as that breath twisted and morphed into a screen above the lighter, a message displayed as if in response to his question.

[ Cursed object: Sorrowful Vengeance

Grade: C

“Burn the web, flesh, blood and bone”

Uses: 2 / 3 ]

“Oh..? What is this...the cockroach is useful after all!” Walker’s smile greeted Hajoon as he crouched and tugged the lighter out of the floor with a hand that was wrapped in cloth.

“A cursed object, it says...another term for artifact I’m sure. It’s fire...is strong, the message doesn’t lie...I have the proof of that.” He stared at his missing thumb through the extra cloth, then clenched his fist over the lighter.

*It burns through flesh and bone...? Then Hyejin...she...?*

*Burned?*

Hajoon's hands shook before they pressed into the layer of ash that lined the floor. His fingers swept through it, staring at the ash that slipped through his finger in shock.

The distinct stench of human flesh, burned or otherwise, was present in that ash. He had to pull the scarf piece off of his mouth as he threw up, the last of his energy leaving him in a flash of what stank of coffee.

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Hajoon felt weak, both mentally and physically as the strong winds tossed him around the rooftop at its whim. He had to grasp at the railing for a chance at staying on his feet as the others did. They had it so much easier, those freaks.

Hajoon was weak, compared to them.

[ This Hyejin woman you grieve...I believe I have met her...]

He was hearing the ramblings of this voice again; because he was weak. He didn't have the strength to push it away as the scouting team scouted their surroundings from the roof of the burnt building.

[ She wasn't particularly remarkable. How have the walls around your mind weakened so drastically..? Hm...was she your woman? ]

*Why is this thing asking weird questions..? It talks as if it's normal for someone to just...burn.*

*It's disgusting.*

*Haa...I still feel nauseous.*

Hajoon grimaced, his gaze following Walker as the others returned to meet him at the westernmost edge of the rooftop.

[ I am not a *thing*. Do not insult me, mortal. ]

He didn't respond, instead going along with the hand that dragged him over to face Walker's cold eyes.

"There are undead corpses below, signs of fall damage...perhaps pushed from this roof by survivors." He said as he leaned over the railing to look at the street below. There were living zombies as well, Hajoon could hear them surrounding the building, no doubt attracted by the use of the so-called cursed object and the rather loud reactions it had received from everyone involved.

“Those things are weak, sure, but they’re damn hard to kill. Besides, that looks like more than just ‘fall damage’. It was eaten.” Zichen rebutted, getting a glare from Walker.

“There is fresh human blood here.” He swiped his foot across a coating of snow to reveal the red underneath, then pointed to the door to the stairwell. “And there.”

May jogged over to the door, inspecting the doorknob again and agreeing “Yeah..! I see it! Wow how’d you know it’s human or fresh? I thought it was zombie blood.”

“You, are simply inexperienced.” Walker huffed in response, his expression sour, although Hajoon couldn’t make it out in full.

“The fact of the matter is that there were others here at the time of the fire. We also found an artifact, a modern lighter, specifically of the luxury Quick Silver brand.” He continued, his injured hand fisting.

*Quick Silver...? Isn't that a weapons manufactutor? I remember a case study from university that mentioned it...what was it?*

*Hah...it's hard to remember anything right now.*

When Walker’s words were met with dead stares, he sighed into an explanation, “Artifacts, are objects with special powers that Hunters and soldiers find from time to time. They are, in most cases relics of the past with connections to a demon. Well...if you understood that now, do you see why it’s strange for a modern lighter to be an artifact?”

“Not really, no.” May shrugged, and Sangyuhun shuffled in the snow as if bored—although his grip on Hajoon’s coat didn’t loosen, jerking him along.

“She...made a deal with a demon...?” Hajoon muttered under his breath.

*When you play with fire...you get burned.*

[ Perhaps this ‘demon’ tried to find a vessel...and failed, as they commonly do. ]

*Hahaha...*

[ It is quite funny that worms like them try heh..hahaha...! ]

The disgusting laugh echoed within Hajoon’s mind, and he felt a droplet of blood slide down his chin.

“So...What? Are you saying a person did this?” Zichen gestured around him to the burnt husk of a building, whose foundation rumbled and shook the longer they trusted it to hold.

For a moment, Hajoon froze, fearing that he was talking to him; but he wasn't.

"A contract to the right demon will make such a task child's play. I've seen entire cities leveled, leaving nothing but a crater, a gate to hell." Walker's grip on his rifle tightened, then he straightened up and stepped away from the edge.

"That's the power level Hunters have though, right...? People like us...can't do stuff like that." Sanghyun murmured, fiddling with his bangs.

"Ay..! We can..! We can be the new Hunters, the better ones! That's the whole point of this isn't it?" May pumped her fists, getting a slight smile from Sanghyun; although the fanfare didn't last long and was ill received by everyone else.

Being freed from Sanghyun's grip, Hajoon turned from the conversation to look down at the blurry street, and the bodies of the dead and undead. It wasn't a particularly tall drop, being around six stories, though he didn't care enough to count.

*A fall from here won't kill me...*

*Let's just...jump. It's another way to escape isn't it?*

[ The fall may not, but the dogs certainly will. ]

*The...what?*

Hajoon squinted his eyes at that, trying to make out shapes and detail to the blurry mess that assaulted his eyes.

[ Haha...yes, I can now see through your eyes! Ah what a sight...! Hm, the corpse that they are fighting over...it seems to have a blue scarf..! Oh my...is that not what that Ashiharan wore? I remember him, Ando Natsuki-san! Hahaha...! ]

[ You didn't let me kill him..! And now he's dead anyway...what a waste of the power that I could have acquired...Hm, I wonder where that dokkaebi is... ]

The gleeful musing of the tiger gave him pause, Hajoon's eyes shaking for a moment before his eyes blurred as if underwater. Something red dripped onto the metal railing he clutched, then diffused in a raindrop.

This pattern continued until he wiped at his face with his arm.

There was no rain. Only snow.

The snow didn't melt upon contact with his skin, because it was colder than he was warm.

*They're dead.*

*Both of them.*

"...hahahahaha..."

"What the hell are you laughing about, you creep..? Come on already, they're leaving me behind again to deal with you...uh..." Sanghyun glovered as he pulled Hajoong along to the edge of the roof, before shoving him overboard.



## //Chapter 11

Hajoon had thought of jumping, sure, but the act of falling from a several story building was far quicker and more terrifying than in his thoughts. He didn't have the time to think at all, nor to brace for impact as the fall ended within seconds. His legs trembled, then gave out for a moment as he looked down at the cement surface that had caught him. It wasn't an alley, he knew that much because there were no dogs to rip him to shreds.

"Oh bloody moons— I think I'd have an easier time if I just grabbed a zombie off the street and told em it's you." A frustrated voice reached his ears and he looked to his right. It was Sanghyun, getting up from a crouch that signified he had just jumped down as well.

Hajoon looked up to the edge of the burnt building they had just been on, and chuckled to himself. He didn't know if he found it funny, or if he was just going crazy.

"Hah...yea? Go ahead, I think it'd work out for both o' us. Ya know, because I don't want ta be here, and you don't want me around." Hajoon rose to his feet again, dusting off the ash and snow that'd clung to knees.

He saw the choppy haired freak pause, then scratch at his hair.

"Huh...? You got a dialect? Wait...you fake the annoying ass richie talk?"

Hajoon grimaced and walked off as Sanghyun began to laugh. He didn't have any idea about where to go or what to do, but it seemed that at least the others weren't present.

"Wow...those guys actually ditched me. You kidding me...can't see shit in this snow..!" He heard Sanghyun curse, then the clang of metal rang out.

From the four threats to his life, the guy that trailed behind him was the least armed, and clearly the least competent. Without having to worry about a rifle or a butcher's knife, escaping this strange hostage situation suddenly seemed possible.

Hajoon stared at the door in front of him, the stench of burnt blocked by scrap metal and wood

"Hey where you going? That soldier told me to drag you along cuz he knows you'll bolt



for editing

Chapter 9 deleted part:

*Stop. Saying it.*

*I don't want to hear it.*

*I don't want to remember what that damn name turned into.*

*I don't want to be recognized as **that**.*

"I *said*, I'm *not* June" He snarled, his vision flashing white for a drawn out moment as a thrumming pain shot through his heart all the way up to his temple. He struggled to stand as he heard Jung Hana shriek, his eyes fuzzy and even further out of focus than before.

One moment, his face was his own, and in the next, it twisted and malformed like shifting fog. In that moment, he had copied the face of a man who stood across from him aghast. Lacking only the bandana that kept curls of hair out of his face, Hajoong now wore Vayun's face.

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"So you can change faces, can you?" The short but commanding man, Jonson, grunted as he threw a snow smothered jacket to a nearby chair. Hajoong didn't recognize the ash-haired man that trailed behind him with a rifle in hand, but he couldn't try to deduce anything more; not when something reeking of rot and blood landed at his feet.

"Well? Go on, take it's face. It won't be missing it." Jonson nudged the ovular thing with his boot, and it rolled, face up onto Hajoong's shoe.

He could feel his stomach churn, and his throat close; but he didn't have the luxury of throwing up, so he swallowed the bile. He exhaled slowly as the woman next to him clasped a hand over her mouth and threw up into it. It seemed that Jung Hana was more softhearted than he had assumed.

"Haaa...useless, all of you. Girl, you get one drop on my floor and I'll make you wipe it with this monster's head..!"

Hajoong heard her make a high pitched squeak at that, shaking her head and quickly wiping her vomit on her apron. Hajoong wondered why she still wore it, it wasn't as though this bar was going to get customers—it had gone from rustic to haunted in a day after all.

"So you *saw* this happen? This pest can shapeshift? It's a rare skill...a useful one." Jonson said as he sank into a seat with a heavy sigh. Jung Hana darted forward to hand him a small towel, waiting to speak until after he wiped the fresh blood off of his hands.

"Well...yes I did but—" She began, but was quickly cut off.

"We saw it too..! It was freaky, boss!" The freak with the bob cut raised her hand, nudging Vayun with the other. " This guy's face was on that guy..! I thought I was hallucinating again!"

"Again..? Uh, right." Jonson pinched the bridge of his nose, then looked to Vayun, who gave a nervous smile.

"This wasn't one of her hallucinations?"

"Oh...no, it did happen." Vayun confirmed, glancing at Hajoon whose face didn't reflect his own anymore.

"Why his face? That's what I'm wondering." Zichen spoke up, sparking instant agreement from May.

"Exactly..! Why not my face?? I'm way prettier..! Right June?" She pressed a hand to her chest dramatically, but it wasn't the dramatics that pissed him off this time.

*Why is that name haunting me? Bloody moons—*

"Haha...right..." He smiled tightly instead, paying no more mind to the blob who beamed at that.

"That doesn't answer the why, so spit it out." Zichen turned to him, brandishing his knife like a threat—which it was.

*Why again..??*

Hajoon took a step back automatically, but almost lost his composure as he felt the squelch of the zombie head rolling away.

*Ignore it. Just ignore it. It's not even there. Yeah.*

He took a breath, and looked down at the frowning blob of Zichen's face. Even at arms length, he couldn't make out many features aside from thick eyebrows implanted into a permanent scowl.

"Maybe it's...because I don't know what your faces look like..."

"...What? I'm right in front of your damn face, what do you mean you can't see..." Zichen pushed his face forward and Hajoon had to fight the instinct to lurch backwards.

At the nonexistent distance, he noticed a scar that ran from the corner of Zichen's mouth to the end of his jaw. On second glance, the same was visible on the other side of his face, almost symmetrically.

“Oh..! Right, actually he did have glasses now that I think about it...” Vayun interjected, taking the unwanted attention away from Hajoon for a precious moment as they talked amongst themselves.

“Glasses? I don’t see any.”

“Cuz you weren’t there, Chen. It was damn dark though, oh but it was pretty easy to spot. He definitely had them.”

“Ohhh...! I knew there was a good reason he was ignoring my peerless beauty!” May exclaimed, getting an eye roll from Zichen.

“Maybe...that’s because you’re ugly?” The other Park—Sang-something—muttered, quickly pretending he hadn’t said anything at all when she glared at him.

“So...you copied my face cuz you saw me last night when you had glasses? Where’d they go? You lost em?” Vayun suddenly turned a question to Hajoon, and the moment of peace dissipated like mist.

“Ah..? Uh, yes...that’s...” Hajoon tried to blink away the fog that shrouded around his mind, clearing his throat. He felt light headed, exhausted, nauseous, and starved all at once. But there was nothing he could do about it.

*Don’t think about it. Just keep standing. There’s no way out. It’s no use—*

[ You are stuck here ]

The grating voice in his head had returned, sounding more spiteful than ever before.

*I...I know that. Damn it I—*

[ I cannot help you if you do not allow me to. I do not know where you are. I cannot see, hear, touch, feel, nor taste for myself. Am I not pitiful? ]

*Hah...now the voice in my head is asking for pity? Hahaha...what? Are you waiting for someone to save you? Fucking fool.*

[ ...**What? Did you say to me?** ]

*You’re the fool, not me. You’re bleeding out in there huh? Wonder what killed a great Horang-i like you?*

[ **You...!! How dare you?! Why...how do you know this?—** ]

He felt the nausea rise to his throat as he pushed that voice to the corner of his mind, focusing instead on Jung Hana who vanished into the dark hall with the zombie head in hand.

*What is she...?*

He then turned to watch the ash-haired soldier conversing with the boss of this freak show just out of earshot. An Amarcian, armed with the familiar rifle of the militia—Hajoon didn't know why he hadn't noticed earlier. The Jeoksa were always military boot lickers, why hadn't it occurred to him that they were working together?

*Clean up the Riotbanks, and make a fortune on the monster parts and organs. Two birds with one stone.*

*But was it beneficial for the Jeoksa to sacrifice the whole of Nagwon? Especially Hongno, the money maker entertainment district? How many bars and clubs did they own here? Most of them? Would they leave their own people to die? Just like that?*

*Hah...what am I asking? Of course they would.*

"Listen up, Mr. Walker here wants to give you damn freeloaders a mission." Jonson's sharp words cut through Hajoon's thoughts, forcing him to pay attention. He had subconsciously scratched at his wrist, beads of blood dripping from fresh and old scars alike.

"I'm sure you all noticed the burning buildings? Mr. Jonson and I have confirmed that It's no regular fire...I'm sure you know what that means? Well, you will be accompanying me on a scouting mission." The ashen haired Amarcian's voice was final, because his words were not a suggestion, but an order.

Walker turned his attention to Hajoon, and he had to grit his teeth to prevent the fear from reaching his eyes.

"The shapeshifter can prove his skills there, or we can feed him to the demon that has made the area its hunting ground."

"So this is what you meant by two birds, one stone?" Jonson chuckled, a foreboding sound.

"Indeed."

Chapter 10 removed part I can add to a different chapter:

then walked through the narrow hall and into some kind of workshop. Wood shavings lay along the floor and main desk like fallen leaves, and the dust that hung like a permanent cloud caused him to cough violently.

“Ha...damn it.” He rasped, his hand grasping the edge of the table where the mess originated. It took a few minutes to regain his composure, and in the meantime he stared down at the scarred table and the shape of something under a mound of dust and wood flakes.

“Should I touch that? Feels like I’ll catch an ancient curse, or plague.” He muttered under his breath