

# Ateez Diary entries

brought to you by [@halamingi1117](#)

## Intro

This document contains all of the diary entries that were released in the physical albums, the diary versions more specifically (and the POCA version of Golden Hour Part 3.) These describe the official story in a fairly linear way, the same characters we see in the MVs and trailers appear in it. I'll update this doc as more diary entries come out.

Have fun reading!

**Last edit: 2026/02/06 - Golden Hour Part 4 added**

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## Zero : Fever Part 1

Strongly recommend watching the [Diary Film](#) for this part

Trigger warning: suicide mentions (in Mingi's part)

### A. Intro

#### **The time passing by, our dreams**

Out of the procession of busy people,  
Along a deserted side road  
And after passing a maze of cement walls  
I can see the entrance to a factory with the 'No-Entry' warning sign.  
I cut through the wild grass growing at the entrance to the factory.  
A path appears with several footprints made through the grass,  
And as usual a familiar beat can be heard in the distance.  
The deserted warehouse, rusty iron gates ringing with the beat.

Opening the iron gate, welcomed by our own space,  
I see my friends dancing to the familiar beat.  
When the guys came into my sight one by one,  
A broad smile lit up my face.  
These are the faces I never got tired of seeing every day.

This is our own space.

Laughing, crying, arguing, dancing, and singing.

A space where our dreams came together,

Our hideout, our own world, separating us from the adult world.

Right now, it is a moment void of compromises and tameness,

It is the moment before we opened that door.

## 01. Hongjoong

**I don't want to be forgotten as if I never existed.**

I am sure that we live under the same sky and under the same world. But, I feel like I'm a bit different from those people on TV dancing under those bright lights. Once I become a bright star that can be seen from everywhere, like those people on TV, will my family notice me? Even if it were by coincidence, I wish I could meet them at least once. If my family could get back together like before... I miss the warmth of our living room.

My family scattered around and here I am with my new family I made while living alone... I've met my fellow members by doing music together in our little hideout. Just thinking about them warms my heart! I really hope we can achieve our dreams together! My family, the music we love, and our dreams... We must keep them.

## 02. Seonghwa

**She, who was dancing to the beat.**

Everything around me froze for a moment. The only thing I could hear was the sound of music coming from her earphones. She was moving as if nothing mattered anymore.

Common sense, rules, and this tough world didn't have power over her moves. Right this moment, my world broke along this snowy road. Something changed in me, but I stayed still and couldn't say anything.

She dropped a bracelet that had 'Be Free' engraved on it. Ever since that day, I went to the same place at the same time.

But, she never came back. I didn't know her name or address. Just like the 'Be Free' bracelet she wore, she freed herself away. Since then, music never sounded the same

again. I can no longer distinguish the structure, code, or genre of the song. Only the lingering feeling of that day remains.

### 03. Yunho

#### **Weather is clear**

Hey brother, you look like you are in such a good mood today!  
The weather is so good as well. Even though I was running to see you, I didn't even feel the heat.  
On days like this, we would have gone to the Han River for some street performance, right? Ah, I'm getting nostalgic!  
Oh, brother! It has been a while since I took out that broken guitar.  
I wanted to get rid of it because it reminded me of a broken side of you. But since it's a guitar you cherished so much, I just left it out of sight because it seemed like you abandoned your dream.

You know brother: I have a friend like you on our team! His name is Hongjoong. He is the kind of person I would go to when things get tough. He is a person I admire on both artistic and humane level. Thinking about it now, you both kind of look alike? I think you guys would get along together if you'd ever meet each other.  
You know, now I am laughing thanks to Hongjoong and the guys from the team. I avoid thinking about these painful memories and instead I am focusing on the dreams you couldn't achieve. I will make them happen: the boys and I will make it happen.

When that time comes, you must wake up from the long hibernation. I want to show you all of it!  
I'll be back tomorrow. Good night!

### 04. Yeosang

#### **Just like a midsummer night's dream**

I was never too good with mechanics. It all started when I dismantled the speaker. Every time I felt stuffy, I would disassemble various appliances or instruments and then reassemble them back together.

My parents had everything planned for me: doing the same routine at the exact same time. The only time I could go out of this cycle was when I disassembled and reassembled things.

Thanks to this weird habit, I met the guys.

That day in that shabby warehouse, a bunch of guys I'd normally run away from, asked me if I knew how to work a drone. This whole encounter was a bit strange! I actually was lost and wandering around. The sound of music is what brought me to that place.

From that day on I went there every day.

The best feeling was dancing to the music. Dancing was such a mind-blowing activity.

Even when I saw my parents' worried faces flashing before my eyes, I just couldn't stop.

For the first time ever, I felt alive. Heart pounding like it's about to burst out and this tingling feeling coming up from my fingertips started to take over me.

Was there a moment when I wanted something this bad? One by one, more children started to say my name. The path that only I walked with one another person became the path to many. Slowly, the word 'I' became 'ours'. However, now I must leave the 'ours'.

If I back out everything will be back to normal, the scattered members and the stolen hideout.

I'm sorry guys.

## 05. San

### **I don't know**

I was always laughing, but I always felt lonely. I just couldn't open up or maybe I've never had the time to open up. Every time I got closer to someone, I had to move. It is happening again today, but this time it's a little different.

Now I have friends to talk to about my feelings. As soon as I saw them, I knew right off the bat, they're like me. Oh, Seonghwa was a little different. He never tried to do anything the traditional way, he was always 'HIS' way.

My dad said we would have to move again. It was something I was used to hearing, but this time it hit differently. Can I just leave like that now that I have a place of my own...

What should I say to Wooyoung? Thanks to him, thanks to my friends, I was able to perfect my dance moves.

Bobo, what should I do? What? You want me to do it the 'MY' way?

## 06. Mingi

### **The sound of his laughter**

Music was my haven, my escape, my one and only relief. When I felt like dying, I would listen to music.

I wasn't afraid of death! People who never lived in poverty would never understand this feeling. People around me looked at me as if I were an alien from another planet, laughing at an immature high school student wanting to die. I guess it is uncommon for someone my age to feel that way.

Only few friends' names you remember through elementary, middle, and high school. Most of them were in elementary school. No one talked to me, but that is mainly because I didn't answer even when they tried talking to me. But Wooyoung was different. Not that I remember, he was with me all throughout elementary, middle, and high school. Wooyoung would always come next to me every break. Whether I answer or not, he would go on with his stories about our classmates, his favorite songs, some respected American dancers, and that music team he works for outside of school. He always tops it with that signature laugh of his, which naturally made me laugh. Out of shyness, I started calling him 'Woo-Ong'. Ah, that unique laugh of his. He was the first friend I've ever opened up to.

At some point, I started eating and spending most of my time with Wooyoung. It was around that time too when I followed him to the hideout for the first time: the place where I could dream. They were friends who took me as I am. We cried, laughed, and made music together. They accepted me as who I am, regardless of where I live or who my parents were. I felt exuberant for the first time in my life. But now I'm getting scared. Can I really have a dream? Will it not be taken away from me?

## 07. Wooyoung

### **It's different this time**

My mind has gone completely blank. Who am I? Where am I? I want to run away.

Will I fail again? When I was practicing and dancing alone, I was pretty confident! My practice video on social media had reached over 100,000 views. Many people contacted me and even big entertainment companies offered me to audition for them. But once I felt their look towards me, I just couldn't move. I closed my eyes trying to escape, and then Seonghwa's voice popped into my head.

"Wooyoung, before you start performing on stage, remember these three things!"  
"Everything will be okay!" "Believe in yourself!" "You can do it!"

“He will be too nervous to remember THREE things! What kind of psychology book did you read?”

“Yunho, are you making fun of Seonghwa again? But hey Wooyoung, believing in you is the key.” Hongjoong is always good at putting everything into perspective.

A smile crept on my face. I felt their presence even though they were nowhere to be seen. I felt the energy back on my feet.

I had a habit of constantly chatting to overcome stage fright and I practiced laughing to hide my shyness. It was a defense mechanism of mine to focus. I didn't care even when others made fun of it. But that only lasts for a minute, once I became aware of their scrutinizing eyes, my body just froze.

The first time I met Hongjoong, Seonghwa and Yunho were at the street performance. I could see they had something I didn't have: Expressiveness beyond dance techniques and showmanship that captivated the audience. When I danced with them, I wasn't self-conscious and was able to deliver my best performances. My legs are tense. The first step the step that I was never able to do, the chain that was tying my body, was magically released.

## 08. Jongho

### **I had it all planned**

I had it all planned: Winning Nationals, being player of the year, and the youngest national basketball player... I had no other plans in my life than this one.

On the first day of this injury, I was only thinking of quickly rehabilitating and getting back on the field. But, now I can't play basketball anymore. “Then what do I do now? I can't do anything but basketball!” “Let me play basketball, I'll do anything!” I begged the doctor but it didn't work.

I felt like I was drowning. No matter how hard I tried, I was still stuck in the exact same spot. As the time went by, I just tried to keep myself from drowning, just barely holding up. Is it okay to live like this? I know I can't! But the moment I gave up playing basketball, everything inside of me was lifeless, as good as being dead.

That lifeless look, before Yunho grabbing my hand, looked so much like me. My hand is throbbing from the pain. Mingi clearly saw the fist coming his way but didn't try to avoid it. His lifeless eyes are still haunting me.

When Mingi said he would quit, that our dream was a luxury, and that the time we spent together meant nothing to him, I couldn't stand but to punch him. Funnily

enough, it was a heartbreaking moment for me, but also the time I started to dream again.

At that time, I didn't know how to reach out to a lost Mingi.

Where are we, where should we go?

## Z. Outro

### **Into the New World**

Even though I lost my dream and family again. There was nothing I could do. Everyone left and here I am, alone again.

On a summer day, when the hot and humid weather continued without a single drop of rain, we decided to go our separate ways. All that because our dream of being together have become like shackles that hold us down. The scorching sun melted away even our dream of youth and made it disappear at the end of our feet. Problems were piling up like laundry that had been put off. Even if, not often, the promises we made were pushed back day by day and we forgot about each other. It was around that time I began seeing him in my dream.

The man in the black fedora, whose eyes you could only see through his mask, a somehow familiar, but tired eyes.

"You lost your dream not because of the tough reality, but because you guys decided to."

"Get rid of the idea that the world you see is everything. There are many dimensions and many realities in this world. The world I am in, the world you are in, are all real."

"I want to tell you everything, but I don't have much time right now."

"What is this?"

"The Cromer. The key to connecting the world."

He had a shining hourglass in his hand. This little hourglass was the key to connecting the world?

I carefully picked up the Cromer. At that moment, the man went back a few steps and spat out his last words.

"Follow your heart, the map is there."

When I looked back up from the Cromer, the man was already gone.

I then opened my eyes. It was all a dream. I fell asleep alone in the hideout where no one was looking for him.

While I tried to hide my lonely heart and turn around, I saw something shiny on the desk right in front of the couch where I was lying. It's the Cromer I saw in my dream. Wasn't it a dream? While looking at the Cromer, I inadvertently turned it around. The sand in the hourglass began to flow back from bottom to top.

The iron door then opened and I could hear footsteps coming closer one by one. The guys then gathered around me with the same puzzled face.

## **Zero : Fever Part 2**

### **A. Intro**

The Cromer in my hand flashed, but I was still in the hideout. Members who were looking at me were the same too.

It was like an unbelievable dream to hear about the various dimensions from the man wearing a black fedora and to see the Cromer in my hand.

Right then, an unknown voice came from outside. As the sound neared, giants dressed in white suddenly appeared, breaking the hideout door. They were wearing masks that covered their entire face and did not feel like people. They were looking at the Cromer.

### **01. Hongjoong**

It did not matter where this place was or whether this place was really located in a different dimension. What matters now is that those dangerous white-clad giants are out for the Cromer in our hands and that we cannot go back home if we lose the Cromer.

I had to protect the Cromer and the members at the same time, but that was more like a gamble.

Right that moment a broken piece of glass under my foot caught my eye. I received the Cromer from Yunho and started to provoke the giants.

"I'll give you the Cromer," I shouted, and threw what I had in my hand through the window. The members who were watching from behind were shocked.

As the sparkling piece flew away in an arc, the white-clad giants ran towards it in haste. At the same time, I yelled, "Run away!"

## 02. San

The place around the hideout was very similar to where we used to stay. If I had not faced the strange creatures, I would not have believed all the sayings about the different dimensions and the Cromer.

Fortunately, we escaped the hideout safely, and thanks to being familiar with the surroundings we were able to find our way halfway down in the dark.

Visible spaces were very similar to the reality we knew but were also slightly different. Under the cliff where Wooyoung saved our Bobo in the past, there used to be a valley and a gigantic rock on top but here, no sounds of water flowing could be heard nor could the gigantic rock be seen. Same, yet strangely different.

By the time I was immersed in such thoughts, I could hear the members laughing.

The members, who had been taking a break for a while, were playing with each other, relieved that the Cromer was safe. What Hongjoong had thrown out the window was a piece of glass similar to the Cromer, not the real Cromer.

## 03. Wooyoung

The child who saved me was a girl who matched well with the moonlight.

The girl willingly invited us to her house. Tired of being chased and running away, we fell asleep immediately and, in the meantime, the girl healed my injured ankle.

The white-clad giants, who had been fooled by the glass fragments, attacked us again while we were resting in the middle of the forest.

As the giants dragged me away by my ankle, all the members rushed to save me and so we ended up losing the Cromer.

After they took the Cromer away and turned their eyes away, stones rolled over from the cave in the forest. When we ran towards it, a girl in the cave gestured between the rocks.

The girl had a brother. The boy said she could not speak because the white-clad giants took away the girl's voice. They introduced themselves as the Grimes siblings.

## 04. Seonghwa

"One day they suddenly disappeared." The Grimes siblings looked at us with sad eyes.

According to the Grimes siblings, the central government here established a stable future policy for the entire human race by running AI simulations. They put the blame on human emotions for causing crimes and terrorism that threaten humanity and so the key to their policy was to control the variables called human emotions.

A bill to lower human emotions below the thresholds by using advanced technology and a bill to ban the arts, which greatly affect human emotions, had been passed.

Consequently, the central government had achieved high growth under a strong control policy, and people enjoyed material affluence. However, laughter disappeared from their faces, and only efficiency and logic became the priority in this society.

As those days continued, men wearing black fedoras began to appear one day. They sang and performed here and there and that was said to have the power to attract people. Being stimulated by these men, people who escaped the control began to appear. People from various fields formed a resistance against the central government and called themselves the 'Black Pirates'.

The central government put the men in Black Fedora on the wanted list, but they repeatedly failed to arrest them due to them being able to teleport using the Cromer. However, at last, by putting in the new Android Guardians - probably the white-clad giants who came to catch us - the government succeeded in capturing the men in Black Fedora.

The Black Pirates and the resistance, all that does not matter. What is important is that we need the Cromer to return home and that we lost our Cromer to the Android Guardians.

## 05. Yeosang

To my beloved father,

Father, I'm walking toward the 'Strickland' where I may not be able to come back.

Now that I'm walking on a bumpy road after always having walked on a beautiful and straight road, my feet keep on throbbing.  
My feet are sore, but I still feel good.  
That is because I'm with my friends and I'm walking towards a place that I've decided on my own.

Everyone says this is a new world but somehow, I'm familiar with the scenery here. The city I faced after coming down from the woods, I could only see people who were running without taking a single look in the sky, as if they were being chased, people who took the escalators like products being placed on machines, people who removed unnecessary smiles and only talked about their needs, and people who were only looking at small machines, having forgotten how to see each other face to face.

I thought that maybe this place is not a new world, but that I'm just taking a microscopic look at the world I was living in.

Father, I know you were shocked to see me singing and dancing with these friends. But I really wanted to escape the world I've lived in, the world I've been trapped in.

I love my parents so much, but I have never been happy in your world.

When we were kicked out of the garage that we have been using as our hideout and had to be separated, what was more painful to me was that my father was the one that drove us out.

I became the person that took happiness away from the friends who have willingly invited me into their world. I regretted that if they haven't met me from the beginning, this situation wouldn't have happened. I resented you, father.

Father, thus I will not return to the world you have created.

It's not that I don't love you, it is that I don't want to blame you anymore.

Your son, Yeosang

## 06. Mingi

To find the Cromer, we must go to the Android Guardians' bunker, but the only person who knows where the bunker is is Left Eye, the manager of the Strictland dump. So, we had no choice but to come to this place.

As if they were continuously burning trash, the yellow smoke, which is said to cause hallucinations, was constantly soaring. Perhaps because of that, the man named Left Eye was mumbling to himself in the air. Whew... how do we locate the Android bunker from that person?

Thanks to nosy Wooyoung, we decided to find the location of the Android bunker as well as regain the voice of the Grimes girl. That dude is always so unnecessarily nosy like that. By what we have heard from Hongjoong and the Grimes siblings, that Left Eye man seems to have his own story too. Whatever, there's no one without a story.

Anyway, we split into teams. Members who will go into a pile of trash that looks like a cave to find the voice and members who will convince Left Eye to find out the location of the Android bunker. I was in the latter.

## 07. Jongho

Boing boing. I heard a basketball bounce. I thought I misheard.

To find the girl's abandoned voice, I slowly entered the cave with a thin string tied around my body and a gas mask on my face. (I don't even know how someone can abandon a voice and find it back, but they say it's possible because of the new energy extraction thing.)

I have never seen the shape of a voice before. When I asked the Grimes boy if it had a shape or color, he said it looks like a bead with a blue condensed energy inside. The bead the boy had told us was shining deep inside the yellow smoke.

Then, I heard the basketball bounce again. When I stopped walking, a basketball rolled in front of my feet. 'Victory is mine. J.H.' It was my ball. When I looked up, I was standing in a stadium.

"What are you doing? Pass it!"

My teammate shouted at me. Is it deja vu...? I blanked out. The whistle rang in the stadium. I think I had a strange dream for a bit. I was looking for something, but I couldn't remember what it was.

The game started again. I ran into the court.

## 08. Yunho

Left Eye, who ran a small but unique brand shop after studying fashion design, was often disqualified from interviews at the fashion house due to his unfriendly

appearance. However, he had great skills and was a warm person with passion. Until he lost his daughter.

His daughter was hit by a speeding car while she was reaching out her hand to save a flower that had bloomed on the road. People thought moving forward quickly was more important than looking around. Even after seeing the child on the street after getting hit by the car, people were busy passing by, pretending not to have seen anything. During that time, the child dies slowly. Left Eye is said to have become furious and fallen into despair when he had belatedly learned of this truth and has become a completely different person ever since.

After losing his daughter, he met the illusion of his daughter while being intoxicated by the smoke that creates delusions at Strictland's dump. And while he was wandering around in the dump, he was selected by the Android Guardian to become the manager of Strictland.

It reminded me of my brother the whole time I heard his story. I empathized with Left Eye's feelings a little bit. Left Eye reminded me of when I had lost my brother.

Despite my original intentions to find out about the Android bunker, I personally wanted to help him out as well.

To do so, we had to lure him to a place where the smoke was not severe. We had to make him realize that the daughter he was looking at was not real but just an illusion.

## Z. Outro

The safety strap tied to Jongho's body stopped and no longer moved. Worried Yeosang went into the trash cave wearing the last remaining gas mask to find out about the situation.

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The game that had caused Jongho's ankle injury was going on in front of his eyes. Jongho dismissed all the things that had happened as mere illusion and déjà vu and ran more fiercely to erase the disgrace of that past.

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Left Eye started to attack the members. Running away from Left Eye who was chasing them, they secretly lured him into a smoke-free space. When his daughter's illusion disappeared, he became even more furious.

Everyone was unsure what to do, but then Yunho shouted amidst the silence. "Your daughter is dead!"

Everyone looked at Yunho in surprise. "You're denying it because you don't want to believe it, but aren't you already aware of this truth?" Yunho accused him once again. "I'll kill you!"

Left Eye let out a shriek and swung a big bat at Yunho

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"Jongho!"

When Yeosang had arrived, Jongho was intoxicated with illusion and was running furiously toward the cliff.

## Zero : Fever Part 3

### A. Intro

The fourth industrial revolution stimulated the advances of science and technology. It also brought an expansion of the human lifespan to 200 years. As the human lifespan increased, so did compulsory education. 40 years of education was required to learn basic knowledge and simple principles for living in this world.

The central government desired to construct their own utopian society by using an AI system, thereby making it possible to remove and take control of every predictable variable. It succeeded in predicting all possible outcomes allowing the government to completely take over but of course, there was one problem they could not solve - human emotions.

By applying deep learning technology, the AI that identified the new variable as a bug, cultivated a new market platform for estimating individual energy, which was known as something unpredictable, and trading it.

As the government prohibited all kinds of art and exercised control over the new energy trading platform, sensitivity, emotion, and free will gradually faded away, and humanity fell to components for maintaining the world.

### Jongho

A referee announced the restart of the game. My teammate intercepted the ball and passed it to me. With my great dribbling skill, I went across the court. I attempted a lay-up from my rival's blocking. The ball hung on the rim and then fell in. 'Yes. I've

turned the game around'. With excitement, I landed on my feet from the successful shoot when all of a sudden, the floor lay in front of my eyes. 'Have I sprained my ankle?'

My head dimmed out. Just before I crashed to the floor someone grabbed my arm.

"Jongho!" A familiar voice. One I have definitely heard before. Who could it be? As my eyes started to regain focus, the figure of the person holding my arm started to form. A doctor. The doctor seemed to think deeply before telling me about my ankle. It was somewhere along the lines that I had no problem living a normal life, but basketball would not be an option anymore. All my colleagues could do was leave me with pitiful eyes. I freed myself from the doctor's stronghold of my arm and yelled at my colleagues as they were distancing.

'Please take me with you! Please, don't leave me here!'

I screamed at the top of my lungs desperately. Then again, I hear it,

"Jongho! Choi Jongho!"

I could see faintly Yeosang's face behind the doctor's shoulders. He reached out his arm to hold me which stopped me frantically moving. He raised my body up and put the gas mask from his face to mine. After inhaling in and out a few times, I began to see my surroundings more clearly. We were sitting at the end of a cliff. Speechless, I look up at Yeosang with complete confusion. He held my hand and told me the Grimes girl found her voice back. Then with a warm smile said,

"Let's get out of here."

## Yunho

The bat that Left Eye hit dodged me by an inch and smashed into an abandoned window. The broken pieces scattered into the air. I looked at him without a blink.

He would only swing the bat even more recklessly. Everything that hit the bat shattered to nothing. I slowly walked towards him. I hear the members' voices trying to stop me. But a strange form of pity inside me, an unexplainable emotion on top of that led me fearlessly to stand in front of him. Left Eye was still holding tight to his bat, but his pupils were shaking. It looked as if the hallucination was fading.

"It's not your fault."

With the drop of his bat, Left Eye fell to the floor like a lifeless toy.

"You had no thoughts of harming anyone in the first place."

He looked up with sorrowful eyes and began to let go of his tears - together with the emotions he had locked up. He would have lived many days with the burden of guilt after his daughter died. What if, just what if I didn't send her there that day. What if I was there with her, what if, what if...

Looking at him felt like seeing me stripped of everything in front of a mirror.

## Mingi

"Those boys will be able to save the Black Pirates."

Sailing towards the Android Guardian's bunker, I came out to the deck as the members fell asleep. I hear Grimes boy's voice full of conviction from a distance. Not wanting to join in their conversation, I quietly hid. They were watching a video of Left Eye's daughter dancing and were missing the times when they could sing and dance as much as they wanted. They comforted themselves by saying they would soon save the Black Pirates, and all will return to normal.

"Look at the sea."

Shouted the Grimes girl with her returned voice.

The sea absorbing a bright orange color from the sunset swayed beneath. It was beautiful.

"I was missing this in my life." said Left Eye, adding that he was blind by the past wandering relentlessly. They watch the sea for a while in complete silence. As if all the concerns and worries of this world had disappeared, the Grimes siblings started humming a song. Gradually getting louder, Left Eye playfully danced. Although a bit of a laugh, it was wonderful. I didn't realize I let out a small laugh.

The calm wind tickled my hair. The sea shone as if embracing a pearl. As time passed, Left Eye and the Grimes siblings were singing and dancing together. Someone said, 'Dancing defines at least the smallest will to live. So, people dance in the brim of hopelessness.'

That's right. I could have lived without realizing this. I could not see the present because it was disturbed by past misfortunes.

The hopeless sun has hidden behind the horizon and the stars of hope have made their appearance in the sky. The sway of the orange-lit sea faded as the waves embrace the shining stars.

## Wooyoung

The late afternoon of the following day, we finally arrive on the island. From the elongated shadows of the afternoon sun, I could see pensions and sunbeds. When I stepped onto the sand, I could feel the heat rising. The island was considered a tourist paradise in the past. However, nobody had visited this island for their holidays anymore since taking a rest and trip became meaningless and worthless in this world.

To escape quickly, Left Eye and the Grimes Siblings stayed on the ship. We walked down the island to look for the place, called the Android Guardian bunker. And we easily found the place, which was blowing off golden yellow steam on this isolated island. When we got there, it was a gallery in the middle of the island. Gallery... They banned all kinds of art - funny of them to settle and build their bunker there. We passed along the empty lobby and went towards the exhibition. The golden yellow steam continually spurted from where an arrow indicated an exhibition route.

Some drunk Android Guardians were lying on the floor. And at the end of its view, I could see the Men in Black Fedora were in a glass prison.

## Hongjoong

There was a man at the end of the smoky road. To be more specific, they were there, the Men in Black Fedora that we met in our dreams. One person was leaning on the wall, hardly on their feet, and my instinct said that I must save them.

I threw myself to the glass wall. It did not move. I bumped into it again. The man finally heard the noise and saw me.

“Finally, you are here.”

He said, and he barely took off his mask.

As I saw his face, I was in shock. He was me. The man had exactly the same face as mine.

“Listen, we called you here.”

In the midst of these strange incidents, I could only shake my head.

“We are captured here, and somebody has to do our work. You may have noticed it. This world needs a change.”

“Why does it have to be us? Why do we share the same face?”

I kept questioning him and tried to break the glass wall between us. But not even a small crack.

“I don’t have enough time to tell you the whole story. We are going to be seen by the guardians when the smoke fades. Do what I do.”

The man put his hand on the glass wall and told us to copy him. So we put our hands as he did.

“We all face walls. Sometimes we think that our lives would be happier without walls but that is not true. If we earn things easily, we could lose them easily.”

The man and I faced each other, and I felt some indescribable energy swirling near us, regardless of this unbelievable reality - the men with the same faces as us, endless questions about this world and everything. Soon after, we were wearing their black suits without even noticing.

## San

When I was dazed by this black suit thing, I heard the voice of the man who has the same face as Hongjoong from the other side of the wall. “You have to run before the smoke fades,” he shouted.

The Android Guardian was burning new energy in the center of the hall. It was people’s memories. I picked some of the memories that were not yet burnt from the floor.

A memory of confessing love to my lover.

A memory of walking my dog on the beach.

A memory of my first trip with my friends.

They were all valuable and unforgettable memories. These memories were the source to live and hope. Android guardians were burning the hope of people and they were drunk from the smoke. I felt a surge of anger coming over me. All of a sudden, Seonghwa shouted,

“I can't see Yeosang!”

## Seonghwa

After Yeosang disappeared, we all were in panic and ran instantly to the lobby.

Fortunately, Yeosang also ran to us from the opposite exhibition at the same time. With relief, we moved toward the exhibition. While looking back, Yeosang threw a shining object. The object was the Cromer.

It was just a short moment of celebration that we are soon going back home when the crowd of Android Guardians came up to us behind Yeosang. The biggest guardian grabbed Yeosang's neck. He threatened us saying that if we do not hand over the Cromer, he would break Yeosang's neck. There was no way. When Hongjoong, holding the Cromer attempted to approach Yeosang, the Android Guardians ordered them not to come near and just to throw the Cromer from a distance.

"Don't hand it over! Once we give it to them, they will take us too!" Yeosang shouted.

It was the worst situation for us. If we did not hand it over, Yeosang would be in danger.

If we just hand it over, everyone would be caught. We cannot let Yeosang sacrifice for 7 members. What can I do?

Hongjoong seemed to have the same thought looking at Yeosang and us by turns.

Hongjoong began to speak about his decision. He said that he would throw the Cromer over to them if they would let Yeosang go between us and them.

## Yeosang

This Android Guardian could get us whenever he wanted us in this gallery. I don't doubt that. Is there any way to save myself and get the Cromer? No. These guys are everywhere. It was my fault. I should have been more careful. My friends would not have all been scattered if I had not met them at first. Then we could have not been left in this weird and dangerous place.

While regretting my careless behavior, I arrived in the middle of the guardians and my members. The Android Guardian shouted to Hongjoong to pass the Cromer. I saw the Cromer in the hands of Hongjoong.

What do we know about that sandglass? I asked myself and an answer popped in my head. It may be a gamble but there was no other way.

Hongjoong threw the Cromer to the guardian. The Cromer darted through the air, and I quickly snatched and turned it.

The Android Guardians seemed confused, and they immediately started to chase after me. So I smashed the Cromer. The glass broke down and the sand splashed everywhere. I was being dragged away and Hongjoong tried to grab my hand. The light flashed.

## Z. Outro

“One, two, three, four, five, six... seven.”

San’s quivering voice echoed in the heavy air of Dawn. When we woke up, we were in the warehouse where our journey began, and everything was remaining the same.

San could not believe that there were only seven of them. He wiped his tears and tried to get himself together. Everyone was silent, they were only staring into each other’s eyes.

“Jongho, Wooung, Mingi, Yunho, Seonghwa, Hongjoong and I...”

San repeatedly shook his head. He mumbled to count again and again with a crying voice then he moaned. A shadow of despair fell on their faces.

“What would happen to Yeosang? Like the Black Pirate, what if he’s been...”

Wooyoung couldn’t finish his sentence. A heavy silence filled the space, and no one could answer his question.

Hongjoong stood up from the couch. He opened and showed his hands full of blood and fragments of glass and dirty sand to the members. He dusted his hands off. Broken pieces fell down and down.

“We shouldn’t have been there then nothing would have happened...”

Knock knock, there was a knocking sound from an old door. Hard-faced Hongjoong opened the door.

Nobody was there. Something bumped into the door and fell on the floor.

“This is Yeosang’s drone.”

“Who drove this here?”

Hongjoong swept dirt from the drone and placed it on top of a drawer. He stared at the lights coming from the slightly opened door.

We all surely felt it. Yeosang is alive.

## Zero : Fever Epilogue

### A. Intro

**“Saving humanity from the doom that’s about to strike”**

**A Trio caught stealing a Mayan relic was revealed as ‘Sciensalvar,’ a new religious organization.**

The security arrested the trio red-handed. The trio were attempting to steal a Mayan relic from ‘The Mayan Civilization’ exhibition at the National Museum of Korea. Seoul Yongsan Police Station is investigating suspects A(31), B(28), and C(21) for the crime attempt of special larceny. The trio are suspected of stealing the exhibited relic from ‘The Time, Destiny, and Prophecy of the Mayan Civilization’ at 10:05 AM on the 10th. The reporter behind the case interviewed suspect A’s crime motive. Suspect A stated that “I had to steal the relic to save humanity before they face the world’s end.” It was later found that the trio are believers of the religion “Sciensalvar’.

It is speculated that the trio committed the crime under the influence of Henry Jo, the religious leader. Sciensalvar is a new religion and was established in 1999 by a scientist named Henry Jo. This religion believes that humans are a collection of energy, and human concerns from an uncertain future can be resolved by science. Henry Jo frequently mentioned the Mayan relic, shaped in an hourglass, in official statements. Henry Jo also mentioned that the energy condensed inside of it will be the key to saving humanity.

The Mayan relic Henry Jo mentioned is an hourglass artifact that imitates the moon’s movement. There are many speculations for the exact purpose of the artifact among experts. However, one clear established theory is that the relic, crafted through an uncommon metallurgy technique, was used for ceremonial purposes.

### 01. San

A week has passed since we came back here without Yeosang.

We stayed at this place, where Android Guardians do not exist, before we left to that other dimension.

That street and people, all still looked the same as always. But the only thing that changed is the time zone. Simply put, we have returned to the past.

This was the moment before we gathered at our hideout, not too long before Yunho's older brother's car accident. We assumed that the time zone was twisted when the Cromer broke, and Yunho was thrilled.

Probably because his brother was brought back to life from the tragic accident. I can understand Yunho, but deep down in my heart, I felt bitter against him. Whether we are in the past or present, one thing was clear. We may be alive, but Yeosang isn't here with us. Since the Cromer was broken, there's no way for us to be back there.

We were hopelessly wasting time, then Seonghwa rushed and shouted

"This is the Cromer, right?"

He showed an article featuring the attempted robbery of the Mayan relic exhibited at the National Museum of Korea, 'The Hourglass that Captures the Lunar Movement'.

## 02. Seonghwa

"If we think back, to the broken Cromer, I got in my dream, was from the man with the black fedora. It means, that Cromer was existing in their dimension. It would be possible that there is another Cromer in this dimension. Let's find the Cromer to find Yeosang and put it back to the original place!" Hongjoong yelled. However, other members were against Hongjoong's idea, saying it is too dangerous and illegal.

"Whether it is legal or illegal, What about Yeosang? You are telling me that you want us to leave him there?"

If it were me in the past, who was stuck up and scared to break the rules, I would have reacted the same as the other members when Hongjoong suggested his idea. Maybe this made me even madder.

But now, I'm not the person who I used to be.

Saving Yeosang is my top priority.

"We decided not to be stuck in the past. When we left for another dimension, we all made up our minds. Didn't we?"

We do know we are not in the present. So, we must go back to make everything right.

After giving some thought, one by one, the members started to agree with stealing the Cromer.

As everyone was coming together, Yunho quietly said, "I want to stay here. I can't leave my brother."

### 03. Jongho

As much as I believed in Yunho, his statement came as a shock.  
I walked around our hideout to pull myself together.  
Mingi quietly came out and walked with me. He probably felt the same.

“I respect Yunho’s decision.”  
I looked at Mingi, perplexed. He carefully went on.

‘When I thought that I may lose my grandmother, everything felt meaningless, even my dreams and our members. I believe it will be even worse for Yunho. He already lost his brother once. He’d never want to let him go.’  
At that moment, I remembered when I punched Mingi. When Mingi told us he wanted to quit, saying that our dreams are meaningless, I felt betrayed and swung my fist.  
Obviously, my heart was instantly flooded with regret...

“It’s too late to say this now, but I didn’t want to give up at all.”  
He said that the only reason he’d made up his mind to give up was his grandmother, his only family member who had collapsed on that day. The fact that he is having a great time with our members while his grandmother is suffering haunted him.  
I was able to finally understand Mingi’s perspective after he shared his story.  
I knew that I could never fully understand what Yunho has gone through, but I assumed that he had a hard time as well.  
He should be conflicted between finding his brother and saving Yeosang. I am sure he is suffering from it.

After having a long discussion, we chose to respect Yunho’s choice.  
No one can force him to decide.

### 04. Yunho

Everyone should be in front of the museum by now.  
Why am I so nervous? I’m sure everything is going as we planned.

My brother scolded me for checking my phone every minute. Full of embarrassment, I put down my phone. I started to massage his left leg, telling him everything was fine. “You are so weird! You’ve changed so much! Well, I like it a lot better than when you were wandering around on your motorcycle... But I still can’t get used to this sudden change in the last two weeks.”  
I understand what he said. Well, I came back from the future.

'I think God gave you perfect hands at the cost of giving legs that need a bit of help.'  
I said.

I imitated my brother playing the guitar as he gave me a curious look. He laughed out loud and asked me to massage his left leg harder.

Since birth, he had a dysfunctional right leg, so my brother's left leg would always be swollen as it is doing all of the leg work.

"Well if my legs were good, I would never imagine myself sitting here to play the instrument. Maybe some deficiencies are a blessing in disguise, giving insight. Right?"

He finished talking and turned on the TV in the corner of the room, and the headline news came out. It was about Henry Jo, the leader of Sciensalvar, breaking into the National Museum of Korea to steal Mayan relics with hundreds of Sciensalvar's believers. Some boys who were trying to stop them from stealing the relic, and now they are held as hostages.

I jumped up. The hostages were my members.

I took out my motorcycle key from the cabinet and yelled at my brother, "Stay inside. You must stay inside no matter what!"

## 05. Wooyoung

I thought Sciensalvar was a religious group. But why... Why is Henry Jo pointing his knife at my throat? How did this happen?

4 PM, we met up in front of the museum and planned to enter the museum in two groups of three.

As closing time approached, the security guards were loosening up. One group was responsible for catching the guard's attention while the other group steals the Cromer.

We planned to go get Yeosang as soon as we stole the Cromer.

However, even before entering the museum, our plan fell apart.

Among the crowd of people in red coming out of the exhibition hall, a man in a black techwear outfit was holding the Cromer. He had a long white beard, a black mole on his right cheek, and large goggles.

It was Henry Jo, the leader of Sciensalvar.

We had to get the Cromer back from him. If we miss this opportunity, there may be no way back.

Right then, some high school girls with red blankets on their shoulders passed by me. Without giving any thought, I took their blanket and put it over my head, and then joined the group of Sciensalvar believers. Leaving the faces of embarrassed high school girls behind, the members also joined the group covered with blankets.

We gradually approached Henry Jo.

As we reached close enough to snatch the Cromer... Bang! The police shot a blank fire shot and blocked Henry Jo and the Sciensalvar believers.

At that moment I reached towards the Cromer... But Henry Jo pointed a blade at my throat even more quickly. He whispered in my ear, holding back his laughter.

"I just needed a hostage, so thank you for coming!"

## 06. Hongjoong

"Think Hongjoong. Think!"

My head blacked out.

My head stopped because of this fear I'd never felt before. Bang! The police shot another blank fire shot.

As the final warning, the police yelled that if the hostages were not released, they would fire shots immediately. As the believers started to murmur, Henry Jo yelled not to be swayed.

At this moment, a group of bikers ran toward the museum with a loud exhaust sound. Six bikes began to circle the crown of Sciensalvar. The believers started to get nervous about the riders' unknown intentions.

Henry Jo shouted, but the motorcycles were too loud to hear anything.

Then, a familiar sticker caught my eye. 'ATEEZ YH'. It was Yunho! The other riders must be Yunho's friends.

I intuitively knew Yunho's plan.

As Henry Jo lost control over his believers he turned towards the crowd.

"Wooyoung!!!"

I wasn't sure if Wooyoung heard me, or if he intuitively knew it was Yunho, but Wooyoung snatched the Cromer and started to run.

As soon as we ran out of the group of believers, Yunho and the riders seated us on their motorcycles and ramped up

We could see Henry Jo running away alone while the police were trying to control the believers.

## 07. Mingi

“Ah, I knew you'd come back!” I shouted with excitement behind Yunho.

As I was shouting with joy, I heard Hongjoong saying “There’s a car behind you!” The six motorcycles suddenly turned their directions, and everyone fell to the ground. The car, coming to crush us, was overpowered by its own momentum and flipped into the pedestrian walk, hitting the pedestrians. Yunho’s eyes trembled as he saw the pedestrians lying on the ground.

‘Brother!’ Yunho screamed as he ran to the pedestrian. It was Yunho’s brother on the ground. He seemed like he was heading toward the museum, after seeing Yunho’s motorcycle on the news. Yunho’s brother slowly opened his eyes and asked, “Is it 5:07 right now?” I checked my phone and it was 5:07 PM. “Your diary said that I got hit by a car at 5:07 PM.” Yunho looked at his brother, startled. His brother went on to say, “Sorry. I read your journal on the desk.

I knew something was going on, but you never told me what you're going through.” He painfully continued breathing. “It didn’t make any sense, so I thought it was a lie. I guess it wasn’t.”

“We need to go to the hospital right now.” Yunho wiped his tears and tried to pull his brother, but his brother grabbed his arm. Yunho held onto his brother's hand as if he’d never let his brother go.

“There’s something I need to tell you... It wasn’t your fault that I got injured back then, and even now, it wasn’t your fault. So leave me in the past and move on with your own life.”

Yunho was weeping. His brother slowly patted Yunho’s head. “I love you, my brother. You know what I always say, right? You’re doing your best just by going through the day. I was happy enough for the last two weeks. I appreciate it.” Then, Yunho’s brother passed out. Yunho put his head down on his brother’s chest and wailed.

Henry Jo stumbled out of the driver's seat of the overturned car. Blood was running down slowly on Henry Jo’s face because of his head injury. Henry Jo stared at the Cromer in Wooyoung’s hand. He then began to run towards Wooyoung with a knife. Yunho quickly threw his fist at Henry Jo and yelled “Turn the Cromer!” Henry Jo snatched the knife that he dropped when he fell down.

“Hurry!” Right at the moment when Henry Jo was raging towards us, Wooyoung turned the Cromer.

## 08. Yeosang

How long have I been in this glass room? It felt like an eternity being in this tube without any light. I found the whole like of Resistances, who revolted against the government, standing in front of my glass room with their biological energy stolen.

Android Guardians covered them with black fabric. Maybe they did not want to see the undead Resistances. The worst part was that the Grimes siblings were among the covered Resistances.

The Grimes siblings and Left Eye ran into the art museum after seeing the light that the Cromer had emitted when it shattered. Left Eye was able to escape the bunker, but he lost his right arm. The Grimes siblings got caught and lost their biological energy.

I don't know how much time has passed. The pain was so great that I desired to lose my emotions instead. I wished that the guardians would just kill me.

When my train of thought went that far, I heard a trumpet sound somewhere. The guardians, surveilling me, busted out. I heard beating and moaning outside. I started beating at the glass tube without even knowing. “Somebody please get me out of here! Please!”

The light that I hadn't seen for ages slid in when the door opened. Men in black fedoras were fighting with Android Guardians behind the opened door.

“Hey, Yeosang.” I heard a warm voice calling my name. A guy came near my glass room and pulled down his black mask. Tears of relief burst out my eyes. It was Seonghwa.

## Z. Outro

-The underground hideout of the Resistance organization ‘Black Pirate’-

A signal came from an old small machine.

A one-armed man rushed in and sat down in front of the old machine. The one-armed man held up a pen to write down the codes. It was Left Eye



**Z: A world without cracks is always beautiful. You, living your life in your position are the world itself. Do not doubt yourself. You are always right. We are right because you are right.**

Smiles spread on people's faces. But no one's eyes were smiling. It was just the facial muscles that moved like a machine that obeyed commands.

**Z: Keep that in mind. The government works for you. The government is committed to you. All of this... is for you.**

At the end of Z's words, the crowd clapped their hands altogether and cheered.

"Z! Z! Z! Z!"

At that point when the voices of people shouting for Z overflowed the world, music began to play out of nowhere with a crackling noise from the speaker. Soon after, along with the sound from the megaphone, Z's voice was swallowed up by the gradually increasing sound of the music, and the yellow light that flashed next to people's ears faded away.

The Guardians who stood among the crowd began to look around as if they were looking for someone. For the first time, the feeling of 'confusion' crossed the faces of those who were puzzled by the sound of the song.

When the man standing in the plaza, feeling somebody's presence, looked to the left. Hongjoong, wearing a black fedora, smiled at him. The man didn't know Hongjoong, but unknowingly spit his name out of his mouth.

"A... TEEZ...?"

001

"Look, once you see us, you can never forget us."

Said Mingi, who appeared to the man's right. The man's eyes lit up with life. Then Mingi threw something from his hand to the man. The man who reflectively received the object, flying in an arc, opened his hand. It was a small square-shaped machine.

Inside the machine was written in small letters. 'There is a chip under your ear. Let the breaker touch the chip.'

In the middle of the street appeared Wooyoung and Yeosang, on top of the building Seonghwa and San, and in the school Yunho and Jongho. To the music, ATEEZ started dancing.

People who first looked blankly at it began to shake their bodies unconsciously in response to the music. The Black Pirates began spreading flyers in the sky and handing out breakers on the ground. People picked up the flyers and read them.

**You are valuable by yourself. No one can define you, and no one can control you. Being alive is imperfect, and it's beautiful to be imperfect. Read poetry, draw pictures, listen to music, dance, and sing. Therein lies your own answer [Black Pirates]**

002

The people who listened to ATEEZ's music, watched their performance, and read the message in the flyers instinctively touched the chips with an unfamiliar feeling under their ears. For the first time, they realized the chips were implanted in their bodies.

The Guardians were eager to control people and capture ATEEZ. But as ATEEZ used the Cromer moving space to space instantly, it was difficult to catch them.

Meanwhile, people put the breaker on the chips under their ears. With a crackling, small spark, small particles popped out of the machine and entered the chip.

The Guardians began to drive the ATEEZ members to one side. From school to street, from street to plaza. ATEEZ danced their final dance to the end of the music and disappeared in an instant. Right at the moment when they were about to be caught by the Guardians who were reaching out to them.

The faces of those who put the machine on the chip were filled with chaos and fear.

The people running away and the Guardians chasing them, the people returning to their work with the same dry face even in this mess, and... among them, one hand picked up a breaker that had fallen on the ground and put it in his pocket.

## 003

Cheers overflowed in the underground bunker of the Black Pirates. Because this plan also succeeded, ATEEZ and the Black Pirates were celebrating themselves eating food with a background of upbeat music.

“I was worried about how to block the control system developed with new energy... Awesome, Left Eye.”

Left Eye said shyly, scratching his head at San’s praise, “There were a lot of failed chips of the government in the waste rolled into the Strickland dump, so we were lucky.”

“If we put this machine on the chip, does it lead to the Black Link we use?” “Yes. But not right away. Because each person’s will is important. All we do is get them out of the government-controlled link. After that, it is left to their own will.”

When Jongho asked if it is a matter of choice, Left Eye continued, “Right. They will not even know that this machine connects not only people but also the Guardians to the Black Link. They’ll think of it as just a breaker that blocks them from the control link. Since the safety of the Black Pirates is also important.”

“But why? Forced link connections are more efficient.” Other members nodded and looked at Left Eye in response to Mingi’s suggestion to save more people by forcing the link to be connected.

## 004

“I’ve lived in this world for a long time, so I know. At first, I felt fear when I met you and remembered the memories and feelings of love and other emotions of the past that I had forgotten. Just like when you guys first came to this world. As the unknown is always feared.”

“That’s why you give them time. Giving themselves time to overcome the chaos and to decide, until the Guardians find out that the control link has been blocked.”

Left Eye nodded quietly drinking a glass of wine.

“When people become self-reliant, a signal goes to the Black Link we use. Then, the Black Pirates, scattered all over the place, contact them..” “What if someone chooses to stand on the side of the government even after getting their feelings back?”

“We can’t force them. Because the fear is big. No one knows what will happen if I’m the only one against it. We can’t dangerously force someone who wants to follow the flow. That’s not different from the central government that says only they themselves are right.”

## 005

“You haven’t figured out the location of Z yet, have you?” When Hongjoong looked back at the Black Pirates, everyone stared at him with questioning eyes. The Black Pirates shook their heads with awkward faces.

It was not easy to find where ‘Z’ was located because it was information that even the Guardians did not know unless they were high-ranking members of the government. Undoubtedly, ‘Z’ is the ruler of this world, at the same time, the symbol of the ‘Z World’.

Therefore, his safety was the top priority to prevent terrorism.

“For now, that’s the last step. Let’s start with what we can do now.” Everyone nodded at Seonghwa’s words.

To install mirrors and remove the coverings blocking the windows, ATEEZ decided to infiltrate the symbolic place that is establishing this world.

## 006

A mirror is a window through which one can perceive oneself. In the early days, the government did not know the importance of mirrors, so they just tried only to control the emotions with the new energy.

However, as people looking at the mirror and recognizing themselves kept getting out of control, they removed all reflective objects, including mirrors.

So were the windows. To look out the windows at the landscape is to open the possibility of freedom and is a door that recognizes oneself and others and sees the world. So old buildings were blocked with curtains, coverings, and sheets, or in buildings built afterward, there were no windows at all. Furthermore, a large dome was placed in each zone to block out the solar heat and intake of vitamins and nutrients, made by being exposed to light, was controlled by medicine. As this dome

also served as a blocker and a boundary between zones and zones, it was an extremely important method of control for the government.

With the Cromer, ATEEZ and the Black Pirates moved freely across the areas, which allowed them to touch people's hearts with their performance, but that was not enough. The control of the government became increasingly systematic. Even humans, who became aware of the control with the emotions rising within them, were either controlled again or taken to the Guardians and transported to the Guardians' bunker.

Now, the only way ATEEZ and the Black Pirates had to go was to 'make as many people aware as possible at once'.

The first target point to install mirrors and remove the coverings of the entire building was the Prestige Academy, which was called the best school of this era.

## 007

An emergency signal rang inside the underground bunker to alert an intruder within a 1km radius. Everyone's eyes were on the monitor and there was a short moment of tension. A young boy was crying alone, shouting "Help, Black Pirates!"

The boy took a sip of hot tea and looked at the members with slightly relaxed eyes and said "Please, save my older brother."

On the way to school, the boy saw the performance of ATEEZ and the Black Pirates for the first time and got out of control through a breaker.

"It was terrifying," said the boy. It was because he then realized how bleak and violent the school and the world are when he saw them after having emotions for the first time.

The boy told, returning home that night, he carefully brought up this story to his older brother, who attended the same school, and his older brother tried to report him to the Guardians, so the boy unwittingly put the breaker on his older brother's chip.

The boy thought his older brother would understand his intention after going through the same process he did, but the reaction was different. The older brother who felt his emotions for the first time shouted as if in pain, trembled, and looked at his younger brother with blaming eyes.

008

“Do you know the Guardians’ Island?” Tears welled up in the boy’s eyes again. The members looked at Yeosang. The place where Yeosang was kept, ‘Guardians’ Island’ is apparently a facility for re-educating the socially maladjusted. However, in reality, it was a place to dispose of people who rebelled against the central government system, and other various things such as art and instruments that stimulate human emotions.

This does not apply to those who have completed 40 years of education and are being used in their respective positions, but those who recover their emotions and act as Resistance are caught by the guardians and then disposed of there. So, it was a place that the members and the Black Pirates knew well. However, they did not know that children who were not even Resistance would be taken to the Guardians’ Island.

To complete the 40-year education curriculum, people must take the final graduation exam. During this exam, they will be investigated on what kind of part they will have in society and if they fail to pass the emotional test they are judged as defective and will be sent to Guardians’ Island.

The boy cried again. As his older brother, who was about to take the graduation exam, could be taken to Guardians’ Island because of him, he desperately accessed the Black Link of the Black Pirates and found a nearby area believed to be a bunker.

## Z. Outro

“The exam is not the problem, we have to save him right away, even tomorrow. That’s how school is like, easy to be targeted when one seems different from the crowd.” Mingi, who had a hard time at school, intuitively caught the danger. The boy nodded. “There is a student organization in school. Since the Guardians and teachers cannot monitor all of the students, they selected the best students and built this organization to monitor others. But as our school organization is certified by Mr. Z... no, by Z directly to the head of the organization, they might notice it before even taking the exam.”

The members became complicated. There was a high possibility that it would not end with just saving his older brother. As it must be something really turning the whole school upside down. If they decide to go to another school, not the Prestige Academy, where they have thoroughly researched for the installation of mirrors and

removal of coverings... the Prestige Academy infiltration plan thereafter could be dangerous or impossible.

“What school do you go to?”

The boy who grasped the atmosphere said with a worried face, “Prestige Academy.”

There were no words, but they spoke with their eyes. “That’s perfect. We were planning to go there too.”

## The World Ep. 2: Outlaw

Trigger warning: suicide mentions/attempt (starts at 05)

### A. Intro

Prestige Academy

With his anxious face hoping that the members might help, the boy said “Prestige Academy.” Yunho smirked.

“That’s perfect. We were planning to go there, too.”

Prestige academy. Boasting smooth, slippery walls like that of a spaceship, its curved buildings form an enormous circle enclosing a large quad in its center. When looked at from the sky, it appears as a fortress with buildings built tightly together like walls blocking outsiders from entering.

And in truth, for an outsider entering this place is no easy task. After checking your entry ID at the main gate, you must pass through numerous inspection stations to finally enter. In a way, it’s a system similar to that of the immigration offices used to move between countries in World A. While only a school, security is kept strict as only the most distinguished talents of World Z can attend the illustrious academy.

In this world, children are required to undergo various tests at a state-certified hospital within six months of birth. After six months of age, a child’s natural temperament and talents reveal themselves and it is considered the parents’ obligation to nurture their children according to their innate growth potential. The children who have been identified as ‘talented’ are able to enter Prestige Academy

and are then placed in one of five classes depending on the results of their entrance examination.

Class 1 is raised to work in the government. They are the ones who will be responsible for researching and implementing systems for better efficiency and control of society in the future.

Class 2, which includes future Guardians, is trained to control people and punish those who defy control according to government guidelines.

Class 3 is taught to classify new humans following the system, and then educate them accordingly.

Class 4 is fostered to handle various tasks necessary for human survival. For example: overseeing new energy exchanges, charging control chips, or the supply and manufacturing of essential energy.

Class 5 is in charge of city management, sanitization, and organization, and therefore receive an education reflective of such.

The children enrolled in Prestige Academy are educated and trained in these five classes before being aptly deployed throughout society after graduation.

## 01

Their promise to save the boy's older brother aside, as a key pillar supporting the systems of this society, Prestige Academy as the ideal target. By awakening the many children being raised there, World Z's ruling class would be damaged from within - they could shake the system from its roots.

Dressed in security uniforms, Mingi and Wooyoung lead a group of freshmen who had just entered the school. With the help of hacking by Left Eye and the Black Pirates, the members were able to sneak into the school in disguise and scattered throughout the complex, each performing their own roles. Mingi and Wooyoung, who infiltrated the academy's security workforce, were acting as entrance guards after having divided freshmen into their respective classes to avoid suspicion from Guardians and other security teams. Although they couldn't talk to each other, as they had to pretend to have no emotions, the two exchanged glances without anyone noticing, comforting each other's nerves.

Just then, the boy's brother, who they recognized from a photo shared to them by the boy, stopped in front of Mingi. Mingi let him pass, but was quick to send a signal to the group, tapping a transmitter on his waist before the next student came.

"He just entered the school."

Receiving the signal, Wooyoung chased after the boy's brother with his eyes. His uneasiness was clear even from just his steps. Through the transmitter hung at his belt, Wooyoung sent a signal to the group as well:

"He's passing through the hallway on the right."

The boy's brother went up the stairs. It was clear he was heading to the classroom intended for the eldest grade of Class 2.

"He's going up to the classroom. Confirm contact timing."

The boy's brother arrived at the classroom and sat down. Maintaining a blank face, he acted as stiff as possible. He placed his glass tablet in the center of the desk and his pen exactly 7.5 cm away in a parallel position as usual. Sitting straight upright as though he were a machine, he gazed at a blank monitor. *So far no one seems to notice my emotions*, the boy's brother thought with a sense of relief.

"Meet me in the restroom on the left side of the first floor."

The boy's brother turned back in surprise at the low voice he heard from behind him. *Was there always someone like this in my class...?* He thought for a moment. Thinking back, he realized that in the 40 years of attending this school he had never once looked closely at the faces of the people around him. Without the need to exchange emotions, there was no reason to talk to one another face-to-face. And, for the first time in his life he made eye contact with someone other than his family or school faculty. Yeosang's deep eyes seemed to whisper to the boy's brother, 'it's okay.' *Have I been caught?*, he thought. As if in response to the boy's brother's confusion, Yeosang flashed the breaker in his hand with a small smile. The action said it all, Yeosang knew that he could feel emotions. It was then that Yeosang stood up and walked out of the classroom. The boy's brother, who didn't yet know if Yeosang was a friend or foe, watched him with a befuddled expression. He quickly turned back and looked around the classroom. He questioned, *did anyone see me?* But no one did. Just like the boy's brother had done before, the students sat at their desks either adjusting their setup or focused on their own work. Only the sound of objects clattering around, not voices, echoed in the classroom. *That's right, no one here is interested in me*, he thought and stood up as if he had made a decision.

## 02

In the corner at the end of the first-floor hallway, he could see a restroom with the lights turned off. Questioning whether walking around in the empty hallways in itself would be an action that seemed suspicious, the boy's brother paused for a moment in worry. Just then a long shadow appeared from behind.

"Don't worry. We're here to help you."

It was Seonghwa. Seeming slightly relieved by Seonghwa's smile, the boy's brother stepped forward carefully. Seonghwa followed behind the boy, as if to protect him. He sent a signal to the other members, 'I've made contact with the boy's brother.' When they entered the restroom, Yeosang was there to greet them. Seonghwa locked the door just in case anyone else tried to come in. Now it was just the three of them: Yeosang, Seonghwa and the boy's brother. The room fell quiet. The only sound the boy's brother could hear was the pounding of his own heart. He puts his hand over his chest. The boy's brother, who was never taught emotion, didn't know what to call the feeling of his heart racing. *Is this 'nervousness'?* He thought for a moment.

"Your younger brother came to the Black Pirates' bunker last night. He was worried that you might get sent to the Disposal Site and asked us to come save you. You know the Black Pirates, right?"

The boy's brother nodded slowly as if to say he understood the situation. *My only way out of this is to follow them, but what does that make the last 40 years of my life? What have I been living for this whole time? And what if I do survive by following them? Then what? What comes next? What if following them leads to something worse?* These complex thoughts tangled up in his head and bothered him. Yeosang and Seonghwa knew the boy's brother was feeling conflicted, but there was no time to waste. They explained to the boy's brother that the Black Pirates planned to rescue him. Ateez and the Black Pirates' goal was to awaken as many people as possible at Prestige Academy and create the opportunity for them to choose their own paths. It was inevitable that the sudden rush of new emotions would cause some chaos and confusion.

"Emotions, confusion. Why would we need those? All it means is that a lot of people will have to go through the same thing as I am right now."

"Chaos. Pain. They're not necessarily bad things. You need to feel them to move forward, it's something all people go through. That's what growth is. What's clear is that this feeling of growing through pain is a new, precious experience of yours. It was the same for all of us."

The boy's brother stared at Yeosang's outstretched hand. His racing heart gradually started to calm down. He wondered what this emotion was called. The boy's brother didn't know what it was but he could feel the warmth flowing through his blood. He cautiously reached out and grabbed Yeosang's hand.

"Class will start soon, let's just go back to the classroom for now..."

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Suddenly the bathroom door shook. The three looked at the shaking door anxiously. BANG! BANG! BANG! Someone outside beat hard on the door.

"Open the door right now. Otherwise, I will refer you to the disciplinary committee immediately."

The boy's brother, who was still holding Yeosang's hand, quickly pulled away and moved back. Then, with a painful sigh he recited, "Thunder..."

## 03

"Thunder?"

His eyes shook as Seonghwa repeated the name back to him. BANG! BANG! BANG! As the door began to shake again, the boy's brother sprang up as if by reflex and unlocked the door. Outside stood a group of students in neat uniforms. On each of their chests was a symbol inscribed with the word 'THUNDER.'

"Why are the three of you all gathered here? With the door locked at that."

From the crowd of students came a girl's clear voice. The group parted to each side as a female student walked forward. *Is this the student group the younger brother had mentioned? And she must be their leader,* Yeosang thought as he recalled the frightened boy from the day before. The female student, who did in fact appear to be in charge of the group, stood in front of Yeosang, Seonghwa and the boy's brother.

The female student who looked as though she were the personification of 'cold' stared at Yeosang with a fierce gaze. "You don't look familiar."

Yeosang handed over the ID card he had prepared in advance. When a male student nodded confirming his name was on the student list, the female student then turned to Seonghwa. For a while now Seonghwa had been staring at the girl with a

look of disbelief. In other words, with a face revealing clear emotion. Panicked, Yeosang moved to block the girl's view.

"I think the door needs repairing. I never intentionally locked it, but it wouldn't open and it took me a while to grasp the situation."

The female student pushed aside Yeosang's shoulder and looked at Seonghwa again, as if she no longer cared for the explanation of the situation. Seonghwa was still staring at the girl and the boy's brother had his head down, his hands shaking. Emotions. These were clearly displays of emotion. The girl slowly approached the boy's brother. He swiftly tried to hide his trembling hands behind his back, but the female student grabbed them first. The girl looked down at his very slightly trembling hands with cold eyes. More and more the boy's brother was losing the ability to hide his emotions. His breath shuddered and his face was frightened as if he was on the word of bursting into tears. At that very moment, when it seemed like it was all over even before the operation had really begun, Seonghwa snatched the girl's wrist. "Why are you here?"

In Seonghwa's question was a hint of nostalgia. The girl looked back at him with an unchanged expression. She wasn't able to understand the intent of his question. Yeosang was the same - he couldn't understand what Seonghwa was thinking.

However, Yeosang did know that they need to get out of this situation as soon as possible and he quickly fought up an excuse using the logic system of World Z. "It's inefficient for us to use our time without a good reason like this. Class will start soon, so would you please let us leave?"

At Yeosang's words, the Thunder group turned to their leader. The girl raised her free hand signaling permission for them to go and the group moved out of the way as Yeosang took the boy's brother out into the hallways. Pulling her wrist out of Seonghwa's grasp the girl asked, "What exactly do you mean? Do you not know what kind of group Thunder is?" Seonghwa snapped out of his confusion and looked at the girl. In this world, it was dangerous to harbor emotions. He touched the bracelet on his wrist, trying to calm himself down. The bracelet was engraved with the words 'Be Free.'

## 04

Hiding his turbulent emotions, Seonghwa asked the girl again.

"Is there a problem with us using the restroom? I don't think the other students and I did anything wrong, so why did Thunder come all the way to this remote restroom?"

Looking at Seonghwa speaking with a steady expression, it seems as if the female student's face shook very slightly. *Is she... feeling some kind of emotion?* Avoiding Seonghwa's eyes, the girl said, "It's Thunder's duty to patrol the school. We need to keep an eye on anyone who might be 'emotional'. This is just one of the places in school we're required to check." Seonghwa examined the girl's face without answering. He wanted to find confirmation of the slip in expression he saw before, but her face had returned to its original coldness. "Class starts soon, return to the classroom now. I'll let you off with a warning this time but if you get caught again, I'll have to refer you to the disciplinary committee for an emotion test." The female student, the head of Thunder, turned around and the rest of the Thunder members followed her.

Seonghwa went out into the hallways, watching the back of the girl as she walked away. The strong, cold looking girl was the one that Seonghwa has been looking for for so long. Though of course, the same girl in World A and World Z seemed very different.

That girl he had once encountered back in World A. He came across her by chance, on a day when the rules of life, logic, and efficiency were weighing down his thoughts. She danced freely, letting her body move along to the music playing on the street. After meeting her, Seonghwa came to realize many things, and everything changed. But on the day he finally decided to muster up his courage and speak to the girl he had been observing from afar, she was gone. Only a bracelet engraved with 'Be Free' was left in the spot where she had once danced. For a long time after, Seonghwa would often go and wait for her there, but she never appeared again. *What should I call this feeling? Is it admiration, gratitude, or curiosity?* He wondered. Although still unsure what his feelings were, he continued to look and wait for her. But Seonghwa never expected that he would meet her here in World Z, as the head of the student group Thunder, a group considered elite even within Prestige Academy, which only the best talents of World Z - and the ones most loyal to this system of control - could join. He didn't know whether to be happy or sad. However, just as she changed his life and set him free that one day, Seonghwa was determined to save her from this world.

## 05

That afternoon, taking advantage of the empty campus while the students were in class, the members installed various devices they had prepared in advance throughout the academy. They hid smoke bombs in places they had scouted out, just in case of an emergency.

The class bell rang and the members were waiting in preparation for the upcoming performance at each of their locations when an urgent signal came: 'The boy's brother has disappeared!'

It was from Yeosang. When the class bell rang, the boy's brother bounded out of the classroom like a bullet before Yeosang could talk to him. Yeosang quickly chased after him, but he had already disappeared into the crowd of students that had moved out into the hallway.

Seonghwa, who was moving down to the first floor with the younger brother, was flustered by the signal and stopped. The boy asked in surprise, "Who disappeared? My brother?!"

At that moment, one of the students heading towards the quad shouted.

"What are you doing up there?"

At the same time, the members received another alarm signal. It was Wooyoung, 'it looks like he's going up to the top floor!'

As a thought crossed his mind, Hongjoong looked at Mingi and San worriedly. Just then, the boy shook off Seonghwa's hand and dashed out into the quad as if he knew just what his older brother was thinking.

Wooyoung hurriedly climbed the stairs up to the top floor. Wind blew in from a broken window in the middle of the hallway, bright red drops of blood falling from the broken pieces of glass. Looking up, Wooyoung saw the boy's brother looked down at his feet. Students gathered in the quad under him and the dizzying buildings. They looked up at him with dull expressions.

"I had only one day left before graduation. Just one day and my 40 years of schooling would be complete. But you Sense Offenders have stirred up people and influenced my brother, and now you've made a mess of me, too. My life is ruined!"

"No life is ever ruined! this won't solve anything!"

"If I don't pass the test, I'll be dragged away to the Disposal Site. If that's not a ruined life, then what is?!"

He shot at Wooyoung with intensifying emotions. As he looked back at Wooyoung, his foot, which had barely been fixed on the ledge, slipped, swinging in the air before it caught the railing again. The boy's brother's breathing was unsteady.

"At the very least I was confirmed for Class 2. I could have been a Guardian! But now... but now... now everything's all wrong."

"Until now you've lived within the guidelines set by the government, believing that's your limit. Listen to me, you're just confused. Because this is your first time feeling emotion. That confusion is something that everyone goes through as part of their lives. By going through it, you're choosing your own path for yourself. You've been a

puppet so far, but from now on you can live your own life. I guarantee it, and we'll be there to help you."

"Yeah, maybe you guys are right. But even if you are, I don't want to live a life that's different from everyone else."

Tears stream down his face. With one of his hands that had been gripping the window frame, he wiped the running water he felt on his cheek. *Water is coming out of my eyes? What is this? I knew something was wrong with my mind, but I guess my body is broken now too,* the thought.

"Brother!"

A familiar voice came from below. The boy's brother looked down at the quad and among the dull faces there was only one that showed emotion. It was his younger brother. He could tell it was him even from a distance. The same water was flowing down his brother's face. In the midst of all those same, achromatic faces, his younger brother's face which was full of emotion, seemed to shine. It was as if his brother's feelings were being projected on him. He closed his eyes tightly.

## 06

"Is this really what you want?"

Yunho, who had appeared without him knowing, stood next to Wooyoung and called out to the boy's brother. Yunho was panting as if he had run up in a hurry.

"How should I know? I've never felt 'want' for anything before. I'm just trying to finish everything before I'm dragged off to the Disposal Site."

"What about your brother? Do you think your brother wants you to die?"

Wooyoung grabbed Yunho's shaking shoulder. He knew very well just what a brother's death meant to Yunho.

The boy's brother's eyes shook at Yunho's words. He looked down again. His younger brother looked up at him with a saddened face and shouted.

"Brother, no! Please!! I just wanted to help you!"

Just then, Guardians ran out of the building into the quad, heading towards the younger brother.

"No..."

The boy's brother called out quietly.

"The Guardians will take my brother away, save him..."

Hurriedly turning back towards Yunho and Wooyoung, the boy's brother's feet slipped before he could finish his sentence. His body fell into the air and his hand, which had been desperately grasping the window frame, finally slipped. It was only an instant, but every moment seemed to move slowly as if time was being dragged out. With nothing to rely on, his body fell and he struggled to seize hold of something, but with only the air around him, it was all to no avail. Wooyoung, who was watching in shock, stretched out his arm towards the boy's brother, but only touched his fingertips - he was already too far away to catch.

The younger brother, Hongjoong, San, Mingi, Jongho, Seonghwa and Yeosang, who were watching the scene from below in the quad, could only shout in a stunned manner. Seonghwa, who was standing closest to the younger brother, quickly covered the screaming boy's eyes. It was at that moment. A light shined behind Wooyoung's body that was half stretched out the window. The Guardians, who were running towards the younger brother, stopped at the flash and looked up. One of the Guardians called out,

"Quantum Energy... It's the Cromer!"

When Wooyoung looked back, Yunho had disappeared along with the flashing Cromer. Yunho reappeared in the air for an instant, snatching the boy's brother's waist when he was only five meters from the ground. With a flash of light, he disappeared again before materializing in front of Seonghwa and the boy. With the boy's brother, of course.

"Brother!"

Seeing his brother safe in front of him, the boy burst into tears and, as soon as Seonghwa let go of his hand, ran up to him. The brothers hugged. They held each other close, shedding hot tears. Through each other they felt a desperate sense of relief, love, and what "life" was.

07

"What a relief. Or... maybe not."

Jongho said, as he approached the other members who were watching the two brothers warmly. As the members looked at Jongho, he shrugged pointing behind him with his chin. Having caught news of the Cromer, Guardians were rushing in from all over. Seonghwa made eye contact with the female Thunder leader standing among them. On the surface, there was no change in her expression, but Seonghwa felt it. It's like she was smiling.

“Guess it can’t be helped.” Mingi shrugged and smiled playfully. “Let’s go!!!”

The group looked at each other and shouted together as they dispersed to their respective positions using the Cromer. Wooyoung, who had come down to the quad half a beat late, called out as if he was upset at the members who had already disappeared.

“Are you going to do this without me?”

A guardian stretched out his arm towards Wooyoung’s back, but there was a spark! With a flash, Wooyoung disappeared to his position.

Beep! With the sound of a loudspeaker, groovy music starting with the sound of a rough, low bass guitar filled the air. Along with the music, a large black tent covered the building. A blinding darkness overtook the people for a moment. Then, colorful neon-coloured paintings appeared around the buildings and tents. A splendid fantasy world unfolded around the A marking inscribed in the center of the ceiling. Breakers fell like shooting stars from above the impassive people. As if bewitched, the emotionless students and faculty reached out and grabbed the breakers like they were catching falling stars. Those who brought the breaker up to the chip under their ears were flooded with waves of emotions. It was nauseating at first, but they were soon amazed by the beautiful world that unfolded before their eyes. As ATEEZ and the Black Pirates appeared and disappeared in the dark, the Guardians could do nothing but jump after them helplessly. The paintings that filled the dark world then disappeared in an instant, and a ball filled with light fell from the ceiling to the center of the quad. Everyone’s eyes were on the ball. The moment it touched the floor, the ball shot out beams of light, exploding like a light bomb. The light reflected on the walls of the building, and the shining walls showed people’s reflections much like a mirror. Those who had regained their emotions walked slowly towards the mirror-like walls of the building. As if they were unfamiliar with their own faces, they touched their hands to their reflections and actual faces, comparing the two. Even those who had not yet used the breaker, upon seeing so many people in the same space to do so, began to follow suit. With so many people awakening at the same time, the Guardians were confused, and unable to decide who they should catch. Just then, the tent disappeared and ATEEZ reappeared among the students.

The music changed and the members danced and sang joyfully. People gathered around them, cheering, singing, and dancing along with the group. It was almost like a concert hall that could only be seen in World A. In World Z, where music, dance and art had disappeared long ago, this type of scene was something from centuries past.

The boy and his brother, standing at the front of the crowd, looked up and smiled brightly at the members. For the first time, their smiles were so bright. Like flower petals in the air, ATEEZ leaflets scattered in all directions. The students picked up and read the leaflets. Within minutes, the world at Prestige Academy was completely changed.

The Guardians, trying to get a hold of the situation, rushed towards the members. Their ladder called over the radio, "Catch anyone who's awakened. We need hostages."

The Guardians caught the awakened in front of them at random.

"The awakened caught now will be immediately disposed of without replacing their chip. If you want to save them, put down the Cromer and come here slowly."

## 08

Caught in the arms of the Guardians, the awakened struggled to get away. The members stopped dancing and looked at each other, troubled. No matter how important their goal was, they couldn't risk the death of innocent people. The members slowly approached the Guardians with their hands up, holding the Cromer. The music faded. Just then, when the boy, his brother and the newly awakened thought it was all over after seeing the members surrounded - Boom!

Smoke bombs detonated throughout the campus with an explosive beat. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, a rainbow of smoke bombs burst and spread out in a beautiful harmony with music, obstructing people's view. The members, who had used the chaos to rescue the students caught by the Guardians, opened the escape route they had secured in advance and ushered people outside. Everything was as planned. The members gave each other high-fives and smiled.

Then, a scream came from behind. Seonghwa looked back reflectively, and through the thinning smoke he saw the younger boy caught in the grasp of one of the Guardians. "Where's the boy's brother?"

The members, who were already stepping outside, turned back in confusion at Seonghwa's question, shouting through the thin smoke.

"He's outside!" "He's with me! Let's get out of here!"

When Seonghwa didn't answer, worried, San and Yeosang returned to the quad. They could see Seonghwa's back walking into the smoke. Past him they saw a Guardian half-hidden by the haze carrying the boy. San and Yeosang went to help them, but were held back by people who couldn't escape and were grasping aimlessly in the chaos. They needed help too.

Seonghwa, who had been running towards the boy, stopped abruptly. Yeosang and San, while working to get the remaining people out, looked at Seonghwa bewildered. Seonghwa was staring at someone who had grabbed his arm. It was her. The female lead of Thunder.

Seonghwa followed the girl as she pulled him along. The two of them disappeared into the different-colored smoke. All too late, San and Yeosang ran into the smoke that the Guardian and the boy had disappeared into, but no one was there. No Seonghwa, no boy, no female student.

There was only Yeosang's voice anxiously calling out to Seonghwa.

## Z. Outro

The secretary stepped out of Z's office and opened the door. The principal of Prestige Academy and the Guardian leader, who had been waiting outside, walked into the office. Z sat back in a large throne-like chair.

Z: There's not much to say. The principal should take responsibility for this situation.

The principal, whose security protocols for the school were breached during the attack by ATEEZ and the Black Pirates, had no excuse. He was prepared to be demoted and waited for his sentence without a word.

Z: Has a replacement been found?

"Yes. A replacement was found and is on standby to start working right away." Z nodded at the secretary's words.

Z: Originally, I was going to send you off to a sanitarium, but as an individual in an important position such as 'principal', I've decided to dispose of you quietly so as to not create another excuse for the Sense Offenders.

"Thank you." The principal repeated the greeting to Z without really knowing what it meant to be grateful.

Z: Take care of it.

The Z-Only Guardians deployed to protect Z immediately took out their guns and shot the principal's head and heart. The principal died instantly on the spot.

## The World Ep. Fin: Will

Trigger warning: graphic violence (starts at 03 and a bit in the Intro)

### A. Intro

The scenery at the square has changed considerably from when ATEEZ performed just a few months ago. Sense Offender graffiti symbolizing "Wake Up" and "Be Free" decorates the streets, covered with concealment screens installed by the forces trying to suppress them. The world is divided into the systemized and those outside the system, with each group fighting more intensely to win and stop the other. Unable to identify the faces of all individual criminals, but having detained the men in the black fedoras, the government has moved beyond simply denouncing the Black Pirates as a terrorist group and encouraging people to turn them in - plastered across the city are wanted posters of ATEEZ with members' faces and government announcements declaring that [Those who attempt to induce emotion will be deemed associated of the Black Pirates and, for the people's safety, executed immediately without being sent to the Disposal Site.]

A car moved across the dilapidated square and stopped in the center. The Guardians that filed out of the car moved in perfect order. With practiced skill, they set up something on the display that had been built in the middle of the square. A rope was lowered, tied and pulled. Brushing off their hands and taking a step back from the display, the Guardians looked up at what they had installed. Content with their work, they got back into their car. As the Guardians' car disappeared, silence fell over the square. The small sound of footsteps began to break through the silence. Several Sense Offenders that had been hiding in the alley slowly walked out. Some slumped down in their spots, unable to reach the display before bursting into tears. Under the square frame of the display, feet swayed in the air. Sense Offenders that had been someone's family, someone's lover, someone's friend. Following the government's announcement, now, when Sense Offenders are caught drawing graffiti or distributing breakers they are no longer sent to the Disposal Site. Instead, they are swiftly executed, then hung up in the square for everyone to see. It is an exemplary caution and declaration aimed at the ever-growing Sense Offenders who tirelessly try to change the world: If you continue to resist, this could be you.

Rather than fall to silence, the square filled with sobs and anger. Clinging to those people who had once shone so brightly, all they can do is pledge that they will not let those sacrifices go to waste. We can no longer live in a world like this. We've already lost our loved ones, we cannot afford to lose any more. No longer can we let our children live in a world like this. With the same heart and mind the people cried, determination burning through their red eyes. We must let the Black Pirates and ATEEZ know. We are here.

The raid on Prestige Academy has created a small but significant fissure in this world. That one performance, while strictly censored and kept under tight control, spread by word of mouth and through the Sense Offenders. It gradually split the world into two. And, the story returns back to right after the Prestige Academy raid when the Black Pirates returned to the bunker.

## 01

Despite the mission being a success, the members gathered in the Black Pirates bunker with an air of desolation. The boy's brother was asleep in the corner, tired from crying.

"Seonghwa wasn't taken away by force. I'm sure I saw it, he walked away on his own.

But why...?" Yeosang answered San's mumbling as if he was wondering himself:

"Seonghwa looked surprised the moment he first saw her in the school restroom. His expression was almost... taken aback? And his face when he grabbed her hand and walked off in the quad, it was like he found someone he missed. That look was so odd I kept thinking about it. It's the same look Seonghwa gets when he talks about the girl with the 'Be Free' bracelet he was looking for back in our dimension."

Dumbfounded, the members shouted at Yeosang that that didn't make any sense.

Yeosang started as if he was about to say something before suddenly looking at the CCTV outside the bunker and pointing. "Oh? It's Seonghwa!"

Seonghwa entered the bunker, his face bright contrary to the members' worries. He walked calmly though slightly flushed as the members poured out their worries about the captured boy and frustration towards how he had followed the girl - The leader of Thunder, an elite student body made up of future rulers of this world that monitors and controls students. Hongjoong calmed the members' excitement and asked Seonghwa first.

"What happened? Did you really follow her on your own accord? Just because she looks like that girl? Tell me that's not it?"

Only then did Seonghwa realize the members had misunderstood him. The members looked at Seonghwa, their eyes all filled with disappointment.

“It’s not like that.”

They avoided his gaze as if they didn’t want to hear what he had to say next. Seonghwa paused and saw the boy’s brother lying in the corner behind the members. Seeing him fast asleep with such a tired face, Seonghwa understood the members’ agitation. Calmly steadying his breath, Seonghwa continued in a serious tone.

“I’ll cut to the chase. We can save the boy.”

## 02

One by one, they began to look at Seonghwa with half-belief, half-doubt. Seonghwa took a paper out of his inner coat pocket and spread it on the table. It was an unfamiliar map.

“Thunder is a group made up of elite candidates poised to lead this world one day, and an organization like us. A resistance. The girl put a GPS in the boy’s pocket before he was taken by the Guardians. We think he was taken to the Disposal Site. And this is a map of it.”

They all studied the map on the table. It was far too detailed and specific to be fake.

“The Black Pirates have been around since long ago, so why not just join them? Why go to the trouble of setting up a separate organization called Thunder and secretly working behind the Black Pirates’ back? And what makes you believe that Thunder, an elite group among elites, is actually a resistance?” Hongjoong asked, unable to clear his doubts about the girl. Seonghwa replied with a confident voice, “To find the location of Z, something only the upper class knows.” There were short sighs followed by a moment of silence.

Not only Hongjoong, who had just aggressively pressed Seonghwa with interrogation questions, but all the members’ expressions changed visibly. Z’s location was something that for so long had eluded the Black Pirates despite all their efforts. Z only ever contacted the citizens of World Z online through controlled broadcasts of video and audio. Government assistants and lower-ranked officials are stationed widely, sometimes even among ordinary citizens, and while the Black Pirates managed to secure some suspects and coax them through emotion-inducing breakers in an attempt to find Z’s hideout, the only information they were able to obtain was that Z resides in the center of a city where this world’s top class works and never leaves the building.

Those who work in Z's hideout are selected from only the most elite and their access to the outside world is restricted after selection. Since the Android Guardians, known as the Imperial Watch, are not humans with emotions, emotion-inducing devices are useless on them, and thus the group had presumed finding Z's hideouts nearly impossible.

As Prestige Academy is made up of only the most elite, there was a higher possibility that more people there than in any other class would be able to awaken emotion on their own and hide those emotions successfully. Thunder's purpose had evolved into this: Disguised as a government-approved school organization, the group could gather internal information on this world in plain sight, increasing their current safety and probability of success. And above all, to secure information on Z's hideout - information necessary for revolution.

The control over everything that triggers emotion in this world began with Z, the leader of the pseudo-religious scientific organization called Sciensalvar, and the organization's AI simulation for the 'best solution'. They created a party under the catchphrase "The pursuit of a peaceful world without religious conflict and terror through emotional control." The party grew in size, passed the Emotional Regulation Act, and as a result, Z effectively took control over this world. Under his control, the world's class system solidified and they began disposing of humans deemed 'defective'. Z's hideout, where all political subordinates are gathered, acts as a control tower and is a fundamental place to this world. For this reason, it is a place the Black Pirates needed to eliminate - a place even more symbolically important than Prestige Academy.

While they still weren't sure how much they could trust Thunder, the members were determined in their next goal: going to the Disposal Site and saving the boy, the most urgent issue of the moment.

03

The Head Guardian of the Z Imperial Watch traced the path of blood that flowed to his feet back to the cold face of the principal of Prestige Academy with his eyes. The thought crossed his mind that he too might end up like this one day, but he gazed at the scene without much emotion.

**Z Now that we've set the bait, the Black Pirates will go to the Disposal Site to save the child. Take care that no mistakes like this are repeated at the Disposal Site. Or you'll be the one replaced this time.**

“Understood. I’ll handle it without problem.” replied the Head Guardian in a voice void of emotion.

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The Head Guardian brought with him over 100 Android Guardians into the Disposal Site. As the entrance closed, a kaleidoscope of blue butterflies fluttered in through the closing door and flew along the path of the Guardians. As the Guardians pass by, Red Humans working at the Disposal Site lower their heads to greet them. In rag-like clothes with skin reddened by the furnace, the appearance of the Red Humans is so hideous they now resemble goblins more than people. At a crossroads, the Guardians walk to the left and the butterflies scatter. One of them flutters into a hallway on the right. At the end of that hallway is a row of small rooms blocked by bars. Each room is packed with people, making the space look even tinier than it is. These are people soon to be disposed of and an air of desperation fills the room. They’ve been marked as defective for harboring feelings or having physically impaired bodies. When the small butterfly suddenly appeared before them, the people sitting there helplessly were unable to take their eyes off of it. A few stood up, grasping the bars of the cage to gaze at it fluttering down the hallway. *Was it some hallucination brought by hope?* The butterfly exited the end of the hallway. In a boiling furnace shooting out hot air, remains of disposed human bodies float to the surface before sinking down again, melting into the incinerator. Red Humans stand on a bridge above and use an unmelting stick to stir. The butterfly looks down at the scene, rising above to an execution platform that connects to yet another hallway. It gently sits on the execution platform as though it were a diving board. The body of the butterfly fluttering its wings a few times looks odd. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that it is not a living creature, but an animatronic. And at the end of said animatronic’s body, was a camera.

## 04

“The GPS signal leads here, but why don’t I see anything?” Yeosang said, operating the butterfly-shaped drone from a van stationed in the darkness of an alleyway near the Disposal Site. The monitor’s screen showed the inside of the Disposal Site illuminated by the butterfly drone, and the members gathered to check the inside of the facility against the map they received from Thunder.

“Either way, it shows that his location is somewhere inside. I’m sure we’ll find him when we get in. Guardians who aren’t part of Z’s Imperial Watch don’t carry individual weapons. As long as we move swiftly, we have a good chance of winning. But it’s imperative we get there before he’s disposed of so let’s move as planned.” The members, nodding at Hongjoong’s words, sat down and fastened their seat belts

with determined faces. With the sound of a powerful engine starting, the headlights flashed on, illuminating the darkness. Grabbing the steering wheel, Mingi violently stomped down on the gas pedal and left the alley, racing through the parking lot near the Disposal Site. Speeding forward without hesitation, the van crashed through the parking lot fence, sending it flying onto some cars parked in a row. *Beep, beep, beep.* Car alarms burst sporadically from each car, and the silent area around the Disposal Site filled with noise in an instant. At the disturbance, the Guardians inside the Disposal Site whipped around. Panicked by the sudden disturbance now of all times, just when the Guardians were visiting, Red Humans rushed outside to the parking lot to recover the situation. As the Red Humans ran out, the members took the opportunity to sneak inside, wrapping chains around the closed door handles and securing them tightly with locks - to prevent the Red Humans from entering again. Running to the hallway on the left, Hongjoong, Yunho, Yeosang and Jongho were faced with Guardians running toward them. The fighting began as Guardians rushed at them as if they had been waiting for this attack. The four members fought back with weapons prepared by Left Eye, but the other members who were in charge of moving the prisoners to the bunker had the Cromer. Without the Cromer, the physical strength of the members fighting the Guardians was inevitably reduced. As Hongjoong was knocked to the floor by a Guardian's fist, he heard the click of a gun cocking from above his head. The members looked at Hongjoong with uneasy expressions. Yunho, Yeosang and Jongho could hear guns click above them as well and the members, surrounded by Guardians, carefully stood up, their backs together. Guardians stood around them staring at them with guns pointed.

Meanwhile, Seonghwa, Mingi, San and Wooyoung, who were moving the imprisoned people back to the bunker of the Black Pirates, suddenly heard a noise through the closed bunker door and froze. Feeling intuitively that something had gone wrong, Wooyoung guided the people shaking in fear inside the bunker. The sounds of shots and screams were growing closer.

"The Guardians have weapons. Currently, all members are surrounded. We need backup from the Cromer." Jongho's soft voice came over the radio.

If the Guardians at the Disposal Site were armed, the members would need the Cromer. But they also couldn't just leave the people they barely managed to save alone here. Something was definitely going on outside the bunker doors.

San picked up the radio and said, "Trouble on the Pirate Bunker side as well. Hang in there a little longer. We'll be right there."

At that moment, the bunker door burst open. A Pirate member covered in blood hurried in and shouted, "The Pirate Bunker's been exposed to the Guardians! We need to evacuate now..."

A beam saber flew in from behind cutting the Pirate member down his back. With a wretched cough, blood spurled out from his mouth and he fell forward. Behind the fallen member, armed with beam sabers, the Guardians stood and looked at the members.

## 05

“Where the heck did the leak come from!?” Wooyoung whispered in a low voice, unable to make sense of the situation. *For the safety of the bunker we made sure this place was hidden, and hidden well, so just how did the Guardians get a hold of this location?* It would be impossible without an inside spy. “Seonghwa... Please tell me you didn’t share the location of the bunker with the Thunder girl, right?”

Seonghwa couldn’t answer Mingi’s question.

He had been so sure of the girl’s feelings, but that might have been a misjudgment.

“Ahhh!”

A scream was heard over the execution stand. It was the boy’s voice. The boy was being held captive by a Guardian. The Head Guardian, his gun aimed at Hongjoong, spoke: “Tell the members with the Cromer to come over here. I’ll give you 10 minutes. Or this kid... well you know what’ll happen.”

He set a timer for 10 minutes.

Hongjoong, who had been agonizing over the desolate situation for a while now, picked up his radio and relayed to the members in the bunker, “They’re holding the boy hostage. I think all four of you should get over here right now, within 10 minutes.”

While the members at the Pirate Bunker knew they needed to quickly solve the situation on their side and head to the Disposal Site, with so many Guardians closing in on them, the fight was unlikely to end easily. Skillfully using the Cromer’s spatial movement ability, the members knocked down the Guardians one by one. Then, in just a split second, Seonghwa was struck in the side by a flying beam saber and fell to the ground. Mingi ran immediately towards Seonghwa, trying to take out the Guardian and stop the attacks flying toward his fellow member, but in that moment, another Guardian struck Mingi as well. Mingi and Seonghwa collapsed, then San and Wooyoung followed, coughing up blood on the floor. Having successfully pushed back against the members, the Guardians’ strikes came down on them like bombs.

Many thoughts passed through the minds of Hongjoong, Yunho, Yeosang and Jongho, as they were dragged helplessly through the Disposal Site to the execution

area, and likewise through the minds of Seonghwa, Mingi, San and Wooyoung as they were kicked down by Guardians into the bunker floor. It was as if their lives were flashing before their eyes.

They met the men in the black fedoras and came to this world, and, like it was some kind of fate, ended up carrying on the mission they left behind. Ironically, here in heavily restricted World Z they remembered the dreams and emotions that, under the pressure of reality, they had begun to forget back in World A. And somehow, for someone other than themselves, they ended up running to this point, determined to save these people that had all but resigned themselves to a desolate life in this world. Through many performances they realized just how much impact their songs and dances, which they had considered dull and insignificant, have on people. They were happy to fight alongside the Black Pirates as ATEEZ, but that all ends today.

Just then. With the sound of a zap, a Guardian fell to the floor of the bunker.

## 06

For a moment, the Guardians' attacks stopped. When Wooyoung barely managed to look up, he saw people in ridiculous masks with thin, long sticks flooding into the bunker. The other members were also confused. As they were all wearing the same ridiculous masks making them impossible to identify, the members didn't know whether these people were friends or foes.

When the masked figure standing at the front raised their stick and pulled the handle, a zap of electricity was released. It seemed like some kind of modified electric shocker. The figure swung the stick forward as if wielding a baton and the masked people behind them let out a cry and began running forward. The members, already covered in blood, curled up and closed their eyes tightly, preparing to be struck. *Zap, snap, crack.* Sounds of electricity were heard sporadically, followed by the thump of something falling to the floor. *Bang, bang.* The members cautiously opened their eyes to find the masked figures attacking the Guardians, taking them out all at once with electric shock waves. Broken Guardians laid stiff on the floor. The lead masked figure approached the members and stretched out a hand. Seonghwa took the figure's hand and stood up. Then, Mingi, San and Wooyoung also took the hands of the masked people and stood up as well.

"I'll evacuate the people here to somewhere safe. Come here when you're done at the Disposal Site."

The masked figure had a modified voice and handed a note to Seonghwa before running towards the Guardians still attacking behind the members.

For now, it looked like these masked people were there to help them. And if that was the case, there was no time to linger. They needed to head to the Disposal Site and help the members in trouble. San picked up the Cromer. Flash! Just as the Cromer lit up, the boy's brother, who had been hiding in the corner, also threw himself toward the light.

"Looks like they're not able to come over." The Head Guardian loaded the gun he was aiming at the boy's head. "I assume the rest of the members are in the bunker now? So it's safe to say that not only the Black Pirates, but all the people you rescued and all your members must have been taken care of.

The Guardians were already at your bunker before you infiltrated the Disposal Site. I was sure the Black Pirates had all been dealt with, but I gave you 10 minutes just in case to check if any remaining members with the Cromer were left alive. But if they couldn't come here in 10 minutes, that means they're not in the position to help you. Looks like we won't need to wait any longer. Ten minutes is already up anyways."

The number on the Head Guardian's timer was decreasing. 00:03, 00:02, 00:01... The alarm went off loudly as the timer struck 00:00. Just then, when they thought they would lose the boy and all was in vain, Seonghwa, Mingi, San and Wooyoung appeared with a flash of light. They quickly appeared in front of the Guardians gathered in the back and disappeared again, repeating this until, before anyone knew it, they had taken all the guns the Guardians were holding and thrown them into the furnace.

Then the Head Guardian, who was holding the boy, grabbed the boy by his neck, lifting him up with one hand and lowering him close to the furnace. He shouted, "Do you want me to melt him feet-first like this? Everybody get on your knees!"

The members, who had been fighting the Guardians with their fists, halted their attacks and knelt down one by one. At the Head Guardian's nod, other Guardians restrained the members with rope. Despair fell over the group.

At that moment, another person was watching this scene from behind. The boy's brother, having heard over the radio that the boy was being held hostage, could no longer hide in the bunker, and threw himself behind the members when the Cromer flashed. He watched this situation unfold, holding his breath as he hid. These people who had saved him, these people who had stopped fighting to protect his brother and knelt on the ground - he knew he should step up and help them. Just in case, he took out the portable jackknife he brought for self-defense out of his pocket and held it in his hand. He laid the jackknife down on the floor and pushed it hard toward Yunho in the back. The jackknife slid across the floor until it hit Yunho's foot and

stopped. The slight bump caused Yunho to glance at his feet out of the corner of his eyes and there was the jackknife. When he looked along the line of the knife back to its source, Yunho saw the boy's brother staring back at him. They still had a chance. Slightly relieved, Yunho grabbed the jackknife, avoiding the Guardian's surveillance. Careful not to make a sound, he began sawing through the rope tied around him. Then he handed the jackknife to Seonghwa at his side. Carefully Seonghwa began to cut through his own rope.

Having captured all members and obtained the Cromer, the Head Guardian dropped the boy to the execution stand floor unharmed. The members were relieved that the boy was safe, at least for now. The boy let out a heavy sigh of relief and raised his upper body to look at the Head Guardian.

"Am I done with my role now?"

"As expected of an elite student, your acting was excellent. If all ends in success, Z promised that he would not deal with you brothers as Sense Offenders but, as a special exception, allow you to return to your existing class or higher after refitting your control chips."

The members and the boy's brother, who had overheard the Head Guardian's conversation with the boy, looked back at the boy, confused. As if feeling their gaze, the boy turned his body toward the members. With an innocent, if not frightening, face the boy spoke.

"I'm sorry. It was just so hard to find the Black Pirates' bunker. So I came over here first and asked for help. It'd be nice if you didn't hide yourselves so well. You wanted to make your group more accessible to the people, didn't you?"

As everyone was looking back at the child with disbelief, Seonghwa, who just handed over the jackknife to San, pulled from his sleeve the note he received from the masked figure in the bunker. He opened it and saw it was a map, and on that map was written: Thunder.

## 07

The prisoners rescued from the Disposal Site shuffled into the luggage compartment of a large bus. The masked figure pleaded with the curled-up, hidden people to be patient and closed the door. Then, after looking around to make sure no one was watching, they removed their mask. It was the girl, the leader of Thunder. She took off her work clothes to reveal a school uniform underneath, a uniform that only the most elite students of World Z were allowed to wear.

The other masked people took off their masks and clothes as well. They revealed the same faces the members saw back in the Prestige Academy restroom. The girl fixed her hair and got on the bus.

The bus ran along the road before stopping in front of a checkpoint to the city center. Guardians stopped the bus for a short while. From the exterior of the bus, they saw the faces of people through the bus windows. They were faces and clothing that guaranteed themselves and needed no inspection.

The Guardian tapped the rear of the bus and the vehicle started again. Thanks to their status, the group passed the checkpoint with ease.

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When his older brother, who had just woken to emotion, panicked in fear at the thought of being disposed of, the boy first tried contacting the Black Pirates through the Black Link, hoping he could find their bunker and ask them for help. But when he was unable to find it, he gave up, leaving only a message on the Black Link and resorted to hiding in the Disposal Site. *When my brother's dragged here, I'll save him somehow.*

The boy hid all night, but around the time the sun rose, he received a message from none other than his older brother asking why he didn't come back last night, and went home, relieved. Without much thought, the boy turned on his computer to find a message. It had come via the Black Link. The Black Pirates had seen his message and responded with the rough location of their bunker, along with the assurance that if the boy were to call for help from the Black Pirates while in the area, and the monitoring staff determined the situation was all clear, they would help him. It was then that the boy changed his mind.

The fear he felt staying overnight at the Disposal Site and seeing the facility for himself had changed his mind. He ran to the Head Guardian and asked him to make an exception of himself and his older brother, both who had found emotion, if he promised to uncover the location of the Black Pirates' bunker.

Yunho and the members, who had believed the boy's desperate plea to save his brother, felt deeply betrayed.

"When I said I didn't need emotions to live in this world, you said something to me. You said that when the fear passed, I'd see a different world! You were right. The faces of people with different facial expressions, the world seen through the window now that the screens have been removed, and the feeling of seeing myself in the mirror for the first time. You must know it all even better than me, you woke to emotion first."

“Brother...”

Seeing his brother criticize his choice, the boy was shaken.

‘When I thought I had to die, when I almost died, these people were the ones who saved me. How can you do this to them after seeing all that with your own eyes?’

“I didn’t have a choice. If I wanted to live and save you too.”

“It might have been different if I had never known, but now that I know emotion, I can’t go back to how I was before anymore. It’s okay to make a wrong choice. It’s okay to make mistakes. You can turn it around. You just have to make the right choice next time. Come here. That side’s not right.”

For a moment, the boy looked down at the Head Guardian’s foot beside him and turned to look at his brother, whose hand was stretched out to him. When the younger boy didn’t budge, the older brother moved slowly toward him. The boy looked at the members with a sad face. Yes, everyone lived by making mistakes. Depending on whether you choose to turn it around at the next opportunity or cover up your mistakes with more wrong choices can make all the difference in one’s life. The members knew it better than anyone else. They looked at the boy, hoping in earnest that he would make the right choice that would erase their feelings of betrayal. The boy, whose eyes were shaking violently, moved to approach his brother as if he had made his decision. The Head Guardian moved his head and the Guardians standing behind him sprung to catch the boy’s brother. All the while, Yeosang, who had freed his legs from the ropes, secretly positioned himself to trip the Guardians. The Guardians fell forward, tangled among themselves, and the boy’s brother quickly ran to the boy, avoiding them. Just before their hands could reach, with a snap, the Head Guardian grabbed the boy by the back of his collar. Before the members could do anything, the Head Guardian kicked the boy’s brother, sending him falling below the execution platform.

“No! Brother!”

The boy bit down on the Head Guardian’s arm and jumped under the execution platform to where his brother fell. At the same time, the members, moving their free limbs, pushed the Guardians into the furnace. Mingi started the Cromer.

Mingi, appearing in the air above the furnace and below the execution platform, had to make a lot of judgments in just a short moment. Could he save both the boy and his brother, and if he could only save one, who? Just as Mingi reached out to the boy’s brother below him, the boy’s brother’s lower body slipped into the furnace. The

boy's brother closed his eyes as if telling Mingi to go save his younger brother. With a sorrowful heart, Mingi turned his head and snatched the boy falling from above. The boy looked at his brother, who was sucked into the furnace and screamed.

Mingi put the boy down in a safe place and using the Cromer ran to the members who were in the midst of a fight with the Guardians. The members, full of anguish from having watched the boy's brother fall into the furnace, threw the few remaining Guardians into the incinerator. The boy looked at the furnace, stunned. At the very furnace that devoured his brother in only an instant. His choice has made a mess of everything. Tears poured from his eyes.

The boy's tears fell and evaporated on the surface.

Now only the Head Guardian was left. Just as the Head Guardian chased after Hongjoong, who was holding the Cromer... "Die!!!" The boy ran toward the Head Guardian from behind at full speed. Using that momentum, he grabbed the Head Guardian, carrying the two off of the execution platform.

Hongjoong tried with one arm to hold onto the boy, but it was not enough. For an instant, Hongjoong's gaze met the boy's eyes stained with tears.

The boy mouthed to Hongjoong quietly, "I'm sorry."

Dragged down by the boy, the Head Guardian fell into the furnace. Hongjoong had no choice but to sit back and look down at the surface of the furnace in despair.

Then, the building shook with a distant bang. Seonghwa checked the time. "I know how you feel, but... We need to get out of here first.

The bomb's about to go off."

"We should go, too." San picked up the Cromer. As the flash of the Cromer spread inside the Disposal Site, a series of bombs went off. A blue butterfly sitting still on the side of the execution stand emitted a red light and burst apart. Blue butterflies that had been located throughout the building burst and in an instant the Disposal Site collapsed. Remains of the building fell into the boiling furnace as the Disposal Site sank to the floor.

## 08

There was a garden in front of Thunder's main base. In it, two similar looking trees were planted. The ATEEZ members dressed in black suits, the Black Pirates, and Thunder members bowed silently in front of the two trees. Behind the trees, which resembled the two brothers, were other flowers and trees bearing the names of the Black Pirate members lost in the fight. "I will not let your sacrifices be in vain. I promise."

It may have been Yeosang's words, but it was also everyone's will. Fireflies glittered over the heads of the grieving people. As if in response to everyone's heart, the fireflies circled over the people's heads once more before climbing high up into the sky. The fireflies seemed just like stars to the people, and so they looked at them for a long time. Like they were making a wish on a star.

This place, a small village in a lush, grassy forest far away from the government's surveillance, was the place where the Grimes siblings first met long ago. According to the girl, the leader of Thunder, one day, by chance, she came across the Grimes siblings singing on the street and for the first time in her life, she understood "beauty". While the raw emotion she had only ever understood in her mind before felt unfamiliar at first, as time passed, she realized the truth that something essential had been taken from humanity.

"Did you realize that while you were attending Prestige Academy?" She stopped for a moment, lost in thought, as she showed Seonghwa around the village.

"At the time, I had already been chosen as an excellent talent and was a member of Thunder. I was also already selected as the next group leader."

Exceptionally smart, she flawlessly acted the part of an elite student to avoid any suspicion that she was an impure person. And on the day that Thunder received Z's achievement award, she made a resolution.

"Only a limited number of people ever meet Z. Maybe if I were to become the head of Thunder, and enter society with such a career, someday I would meet the ever-elusive Z. At least that's what I wanted to think..."

She turned her head and looked into Seonghwa's eyes.

"I want to live in a world where I can enjoy beauty."

Behind her resolute gaze, he felt a strong sense of determination and belief. Suddenly, he remembered the girl back in World A and felt his heart beat loudly. Worried that she might hear it too, Seonghwa avoided her gaze and walked forward. She followed Seonghwa quietly.

World A and World Z. These two worlds seem very different, but they feel somehow connected. The men with the black fedoras who look just like themselves. They were men who, just like the members from World A - even if we were only dreaming - danced and sang to evoke happiness in people. While we may seem like totally different people, we are in fact the same. The same was true of the girl. The girl with the Be Free bracelet danced freely with no care or worry as to how she looked to

other people. Seonghwa, mesmerized by that beauty, saw himself in her and from that day on, started to walk a new path free from restricting rules and principles. *The Thunder girl, she reminds me of the girl from our world. And she reminds me of myself*, Seonghwa thought. Moved by the feeling of beauty stirred within her after listening to the songs of the Grimes siblings, she started on a new path away from the principles and rules of this world. The moment he first saw her at Prestige Academy, behind the girl's cold exterior, Seonghwa had clearly felt that heart - that very heart yearning for beauty.

"Since becoming the leader of Thunder, no students were branded as Sense Offenders or sent to the Disposal Site. I would always just intimidate with empty words like the time I first saw you in the restroom." As she said that, she laughed softly.

"What about the other Thunder members? Did you all come to an agreement?"

"I carefully approached anyone I thought was experiencing emotion. Because it's dangerous. Anyway, while that was all happening, I came into contact with some people who knew the Grimes siblings. After the siblings had their souls taken away at the Guardian's bunker, groups of people who knew the siblings or were awakened thanks to them, gathered to hold a funeral. And we decided to build our base here in this place where the siblings once hid. Through all this, I also learned about the existence of the Black Pirates and heard stories about ATEEZ. I really wanted to contact you, but we, a smaller group than you, had to move more carefully. But I didn't expect to see you at the school."

People passed by Seonghwa and the girl. Thunder and a group of Black Pirates were pitching in carrying food to the people they had rescued from the Disposal Site. "I thought the Black Pirates were fighting alone, but I'm glad Thunder's here too. Just like how we didn't know about Thunder, maybe there are a lot of other people in the world who think the same as us. They could be fighting alongside us right now." Seonghwa's reflection on Thunder's existence giving him strength resonated in the girl's heart. *Did I make the wrong choice?* A small whisper of doubt had always existed hidden deep in her heart, but Seonghwa's words changed that worry into conviction. Conviction that she had made the right choice.

## Z. Outro

After ATEEZ and Black Pirates' surprise performance - labeled terrorist by the government - at Prestige Academy, the institute was temporarily closed down as the ruined curtains were discarded and mirrors removed. The building was remodeled as a panopticon structure with a surveillance tower in the center to help strengthen

overall control. The students were transferred to nearby schools according to their grades, and Thunder's leader was moved to a distinguished school of similar level with Prestige Academy. Having passed the emotion detection test - with the help of a present from Left Eye, a device that keeps one's heart rate steady - and completing the remainder of her exams with top marks, the girl successfully graduated without a problem.

As she was by far the most superior candidate, she was picked up by the government and appointed as Z's protocol manager. On her first day of work, the girl, who had until that point maintained her composure so well, began to tremble at the thought of finally reaching her goal. This was a place sensitive to outside intrusion, if her cover was blown here she would be shot on the spot. Looking in the mirror, she cleared her head and took a deep breath. 'It's okay. You've done fine so far.' she said, looking at herself in the mirror.

The Guardians came to pick her up in front of her house and the girl followed them out and into their car. 'Just where is his hiding place... It must be in a difficult place to find.' she thought to herself as she chased away the scenery outside the car window with her eyes. She memorized the way looking at the surrounding buildings and signs, knowing she would have to describe it accurately and in detail. 'Why are we going here?' The car ran along a familiar road and headed for the city square. She didn't expect Z's office to be this close. They headed into the underground parking lot of the tall central bank building in the middle of the city square and entered a private space marked "Authorized Personnel Only. All others are prohibited from entering." They stopped between the walls that hid the surrounding space. The girl got out of the car and entered a hidden corridor, following the Guardians. They took an elevator in the middle of the hallway. The Guardian pressed the button to the penthouse and the elevator rushed up at a high speed. Ding! With a clear bell, the elevator door opened, and the girl walked along the long corridor feeling as if she had come to another world. The sound of the Guardian's footsteps and her own footsteps echoed in the cave-like space. After passing through the hallway and through a checkpoint searching for dangerous items such as guns and knives, they walked along a long hallway again. Through the windows on both sides, she saw people working in each room. They looked like fish trapped in an aquarium. After passing through the corridor and reaching the end, she was met with a large door. As if it had been watching her, the large door opened as soon as she stopped before it. The refined office on the other side felt suffocating in contrast to its enormous size. All the walls of the room were glass. Charged energy molecules lined the room.

Upon first hiring an office worker to his team, Z always inspected the people with his own eyes. That was the real final test. Only after passing the test, were they able to

receive their ID card that served as a pass - the pass, which is required to be worn by everyone in the office, also functions as a monitor complete with camera and audio.

**Z Which of these many molecules is yours?**

He questioned her, sitting across a high-backed chair. This must be Z. She swallowed, careful not to make a sound.

"I don't quite understand what you mean."

Energy molecules shone beyond the glass wall. They were particles of emotional energy linked to the chip in one's ear. At one point, the light emitted by them was even more intense, but as the Sense Offenders' protests intensified, the energy of those who had turned against the government disappeared, making the light weaker.

Z turned his chair and looked at her. She gazed at him with resolute eyes. Slowly rising from his chair, Z walked toward her with a dim smile on his face as if the final test had already begun.

**Z You were looking around outside the car. And then in the hallway. And now at the molecules that are beyond this glass wall, you're looking at them with curiosity. Curiosity is also an emotion. Curiosity is dangerous, you know.**

Z grabbed her chin with one hand. He studied her expression, moving her face in his hand.

**Z Would your molecule be here? Or... Is it already gone?**

*Oh, the road here was already the test. Don't tell me that all our plans have failed? Is this how I die? She felt her blood run cold with fear. But it was still too early to judge. The fact that Z asked a question means that the results are still inconclusive. I have to keep my composure. I must not be caught.*

"What is 'Curiosity?'"

In response to the girl's answer, Z took his hand off her chin as if he was amused by her retort. He waited, looking at her mouth as if to see if she would keep talking.

"That was not an emotion, but a thought. I was looking at the structure to figure out where I'm going to work. My molecule is here, of course. Feel free to check for it now, if you must."

Z ordered the Guardian with his eyes. The Guardian checked the chip next to the girl's ear to see if it worked. There was no reason for her to be shaken. A long time ago, when her chip lost its light due to emotional awakening, she discovered her own way to avoid being caught at school. She manipulated the chip to turn on and control her emotions right at the moment she wanted and turn off releasing her emotions at the moment she didn't need it. The chip responded to the Guardian's hand and emitted a yellowish glow. Only then did Z smile with satisfaction.

### **Z So what do you think of the Sense Offenders?**

She answered with a cold face, "They are unnecessary impurities."

## **Extra: Thunder letter**

Note: This was released in The World: To The End, as part of a whole diary book, *after* Golden Hour Part 1 was released. However, I decided to put it between The World and Golden Hour, it fits better thematically. If you want to read in order, read [Golden Hour Part 1](#) first, then come back to this.

### **My dear ATEEZ**

The sibling tree we planted together has grown much taller than me. It might not seem like a big deal, but shortly after you left this place, the tree trunk got badly split. I quickly put a splint on it and wrapped it well, but I was worried it might die. Fortunately, it has grown well, so isn't that impressive?

Looking at the much-grown sibling tree reminded me of the child and his older brother.

"If they had grown up, would they have looked like this? Would they have been this sturdy and strong?"

I asked you this question to myself. I imagined your playful yet proud responses. Only then did it hit me in a concrete way: the reality that you had left for your world, and the fact that I could no longer see you.

Until I passed Z's test with flying colors, no one expected that we would part so suddenly. We were so focused on being happy that I was accepted into Z's protocol management position and the next mission. Indeed, the protocol management position was for the best way to access the system Z had built. And the hint you gave me was a huge key. 'The leader of Sciensalvar, Henry Jo.' Knowing the identity of

someone who looked like Z helped me find the system password. (Did I mention that there were record of Z accessing your world in there? When Z briefly had the Cromer, it seems he met Henry Jo in your world. If my memory is correct, it was in 1999 in your world.)

While it was difficult to access the system, the system itself was designed with a simple structure. It wasn't that hard, since after the central government took emotional energy, all humans were no different from programmed machines. The structure of a dictatorship is obvious. We decided to use the well-built system itself. We just turned things upside down. 'Wag the dog,' a strategy where the tail wags the dog's whole body to grab the head and take control. By tweaking the input values of the chips implanted in people's ears, the tail became the head, and the head became the tail. Do you remember? Z desperately searched for the Guardians while surrounded by people in the square. It was so pathetic that I thought I was the villain at that moment?! What a joke...

So... What I'm saying is.... If I hadn't been swayed by that pathetic act, we wouldn't have let you go. Just when I couldn't pull the trigger, Z took an old man standing nearby hostage, and as always, you used the Cromer to save the hostage, but Z used that to take your Cromer. Then Z immediately threw the Cromer to the ground. Probably intending to escape. You all ran towards the falling Cromer reaching out to stop it, but just as you reached it, the Cromer hit the ground and shattered into pieces. As the flash was about to engulf you and Z, I realized what it feels like to be overwhelmed with rage. I pulled the trigger at Z, who was clinging to SEONG HWA to somehow survive. After the flash disappeared, Z fell to the ground of the square with a thud. But you guys... You were gone.

You probably returned to your world, right? Even though you're not in our world, kids who followed your music, dance, and performances have become another ATEEZ, remembering you. You're not here, but ATEEZ is still here.

Oh, by 'here', I mean 'the zone liberated from control'. After Z disappeared and you left, a lot has happened. We were divided into those who decided to live free from emotional control and those who decided to continue under the system's emotional control. We tried to make a unified decision, but it wasn't easy. After a prolonged period of indecision, we decided to respect each other's decisions. We couldn't force them to believe what we believed was right. We chose to coexist peacefully and divided into the 'Liberation Zone' and 'Control Zone', each establishing its own order. It's sad to think that, over time, we might become different nations, but what can we do? If I may be just a bit greedy, I just hope we don't treat each other with violence or coercion.

Thunder's headquarters now acts as the interim government of the 'Liberation Zone'. So, unlike before, it's become a place where people frequently come and go. The

sibling tree stands in the most visible spot in the garden, and the injured trunk has healed, leaving bump scars. I wondered if the scars were too unsightly and whether I should cover them with a ribbon, but then a child walking with his parents saw the tree and said this.

'Oh?! These trees have unique patterns unlike other trees. Wow, they're pretty.'

'Patterns? Now that I think about it, I've only ever thought of them as scars, not patterns.' The patterns created by the scars distinguish the sibling tree from other trees. Scars can become unique patterns. Realizing that made me look forward to the 'Liberation Zone' that will have unique patterns in the future, and to myself.

I'm writing this letter because I miss you, but I don't know if it can cross the universe to reach you, if we can hear from you, or even if there is a way to send it.

I wonder if you safely arrived back home. When the first Cromer broke, you said you arrived in the past. Did you arrive on time this time? Are you still dancing and singing together there? I hope all your wishes come true: finding your family, gaining independence from your strict father, standing on stage, meeting many people, and making lots of money. You've changed many people's lives, so I'm sure you've succeeded. Whatever it may be, I hope you remain 'free' without being too tied down, just like she said, the one who resembles me. :)

I miss you all. The Black Pirates, Thunders, Left Eye, and everyone in the Liberation Zone all miss you. Will there be a day when we meet again?  
Hoping for that day....

**- Your Thunder**

## **Golden Hour: Part 1**

### 00. Intro

#### **After the red moon rises**

In the aftermath of Z's disappearance, there was not a person in World Z who didn't know of ATEEZ. The people split into two factions - those who decided to free themselves from emotional control and those who chose to stay under it. The Black Pirates and Thunder established a self-sustaining order so that these two factions would be able to coexist.

This world was entrusted to those who love and care for it, and as for us, we returned to our world.

Yet, even after we returned, those feelings of excitement lingered. The memories of our adventures and battles together remained vivid in our minds, as tangible as if they had been engraved to our skin.

Making the most of those vivid memories, we decided to dream together once again.

Since then, three years have passed.

And now we're living outside our dreams.

## 01. Hongjoong

Each of them brought out their savings, gathering enough to rent the most affordable practice room to dance and sing in. In this world, their home world, the group - ATEEZ - was nobody, but when they looked in the mirror, their reflections reminded them of a time when they were nothing short of heroes in that other world. No, it was more like they were 'drunk' on those memories of themselves. And just like the high of a good time drinking always fades when morning comes, they were left to confront reality with a bad hangover. It takes money to dream, and with the need to work to make a living, their days spent gathered in the practice room became less and less. Even when they did gather, it was rare for all of the members to be present. But it's not as though Hongjoong could blame them for being busy with work. All he could do to ease his disappointment was to greet them with a bittersweet, "That's too bad. Let's do what we have to do now and try again next time!" Everyone knows it's impossible to live on dreams alone - acknowledging this hard truth is what means to become an adult. All Hongjoong wanted was to maintain his relationship with the members, yet while he did his best to invite them out to eat for a quick get-together, even that wasn't easy. Soon, even meeting once or twice a year began to feel like an accomplishment.

During his free time, Hongjoong worked part-time, practiced on his own, and kept a diary. While writing his diary, he suddenly realized that his memories from World Z were beginning to fade. And so, he decided to record his and the other members' experiences on his personal blog. Inspired by the comments like, 'Is this a new novel? I'm dying to read what comes next!' what began as Hongjoong's travel diary, evolved into a detailed story akin to an epic science fiction tale. His blog readers increased exponentially as the story progressed and it wasn't long before he was approached by a publisher. Hongjoong's story was published as a book, which went on to become a bestseller, and soon his days were filled with reader meet and greets, special lectures, and appearances on various TV programs.

As Hongjoong gained recognition as a popular writer among young readers through TV and social media, his backstory of how he originally dreamed of becoming an idol to use his fame and find his long-lost family became well-known too. And it just so happened, Hongjoong's newfound fame did reunite him with not one, but two, long-lost family members: his father who contacted him after seeing him by chance on a TV show, and his mother who looked up videos on the author after reading his book. At long last, his dream of reuniting with his family came true. Good fortune and a reunited family, a career that he could be proud of, and fame. Hongjoong had clearly achieved all that he had ever dreamed of. He was blessed.

Only when he left the room, sure that the door was completely shut behind him, did his smile slip and a deep sigh unintentionally sweep out of him. The sigh was so loud that it shocked even Hongjoong himself. 'What is this? This emptiness...' It was as if he was watching the curtains close after a spectacular performance. Alone in that moonlight-filled room, Hongjoong thought to himself, 'Is this what I truly wanted?'

## 02. Seonghwa

"My daughter's crazy about that book, so I gave it a read too, but who in their right mind would put up with 40 years of school just to be a Guardian? The whole thing sounds a bit absurd, don't you think?" The fire chief said, glancing at the copy of Hongjoong's novel on Seonghwa's desk. Looking at the chief's expression - he was clearly fishing for Seonghwa's agreement - but Seonghwa didn't quite know how to respond.

If he answered honestly with something like, 'It might sound absurd to you, but my friends and I were actually there. We saw and experienced it all, in person.' the chief would think he was out of his mind. As Seonghwa was mulling over the best way to retort, the dispatch bell rang.

For a long time, the memories of all the people Seonghwa failed to save in World Z haunted him. Even if the boy and the boy's brother willingly joined ATEEZ's cause, their deaths, along with those of the Black Pirates and the Thunder members who lost their lives to the Guardians' attacks, as well as the corpses of the Sense Offenders that hung as a warning in the square, remained burned as an afterimage in his eyes. Each time he saw a similar face or silhouette walking down the street his heart would break again. And every time that happened, Seonghwa remembered her: The girl who left behind the Be Free bracelet and disappeared, the leader of Thunder. What would she have done?

Knowing her, she would have told him to move and find a way to save himself first. Saving oneself is the first step in saving other people. 'Fine. Then I'll start by saving myself from this anxiety.' So, Seonghwa began studying how to rescue people in different kinds of crises. While studying, he came across material made for aspiring firefighters preparing for the firefighter exam. As practice time together with the members became less frequent, it was only natural for Seonghwa to take the test. For better or worse, he passed. Studying was easy enough - Seonghwa had always been systematic by nature and good at planning, and he made it through the Candidate Physical Ability Test easily thanks to his regular exercise and dancing regimes.

That's how Seonghwa became a firefighter. The hobby he began to calm his anxiety became his job. Sure, it wasn't his dream, but that also wasn't a good enough reason for him to give up. The impact of his job was clear and real compared to the vague dreams he shared with the members, and he just couldn't find any justification to quit. Fighting flames and rescuing people in crises was more rewarding than he expected. It didn't come with cheers and applause like performing on stage, but in their place, he was rewarded with the simple, heartfelt gratitude and praise of those he'd saved and their families. And, thanks to his welcoming face and striking physique, Seonghwa was selected as the Fire and Disaster Headquarters' yearly calendar model. Posing for the camera, he felt both pleasantly nervous and oddly empty. For so long, he wanted nothing more than to be photographed and seen, but could never make that dream come true... How ironic that he could do so now, but only as a firefighter.

That day, Seonghwa returned to his office at the fire department and read Hongjoong's novel that had been sitting on his desk.

### 03. Yunho

People gathered around a campfire listening to Yunho's singing and the sound of his guitar. With their eyes closed, they savored the melody. "The lyrics of Yunho's song reminds me of a novel I read recently," remarked one of the students. Behind the professors and students huddled near the fire, a sandstorm raged. Yunho was currently in Egypt.

At first, Yunho tried his best to attend whenever the members gathered, but he realized early on that it wouldn't be easy to keep up with their regular meetings. In World Z, they were heroes. That world may have been full of just as many struggles and hardships, but the shared goals were specific, and the enemy was clear-cut. But as for World A, this world here... There was still hardship, but the source of that

hardship was elusive and unclear. Uncertain who the real enemy was, at times it felt like the whole world was against them, yet at other times it did not. Yunho practiced hard, auditioned, and busked, but as the days went on, he began to see this world as even colder than World Z. People stared at the phones in their hands with apathetic expressions, quickly moving from video to video, always on the hunt for some new and fast stimuli. The human sounds of laughter and crying could only be heard from the other side of those screens. They danced intensely to their music loudly blasting from a speaker, but the people passing by barely spared them a glance before turning back to their phones. The members were taken aback. Had the passerby stared at them without emotion, like the people of World Z, it would have further ignited their passion. But they didn't know how to react to these people who would stop and watch only for a second or take a short video without listening to their song through to the end. No, to be honest, it hurt. It's usually like that though. The higher you've climbed, the more pitiful the fall.

Never having experienced such pain before, none of the members were able to recognize it as such, leaving them to bear their scars alone. Over time, Yunho found that he enjoyed singing and dancing with the members less and less. Perhaps the other members felt this way too, but there was no way for him to know.

As the number of times they talked about their dreams began to decrease and the period between gathering in the practice room gradually grew longer, Yunho's interests naturally began to change. By chance, he came across the Cromer, something he had thought only existed in World Z, at an exhibition on the Mayan civilization in World A. He was at once fascinated by these mysterious relics and remains. Seeing them Yunho was sure there were even more relics and secrets somewhere out there, still waiting to be discovered.

As Yunho stepped into the ancient pyramid, his thoughts ran wild. Maybe, just maybe, if he could find more otherworldly artifacts, he would be able to travel to another world and go on an adventure with the members once again.

## 04. Yeosang

His employees call him Young and Rich, Tall and Handsome. Yeosang, who built his fortune investing in stock, was finally able to start a business of his own without his father's help. Though he didn't want to admit it, his natural ability to read the flow of money reminded him of his father. The small start-up he generously invested in grew into a unicorn, and through his careful investment skills, he was able to transform the small, one-man business into a large-scale operation in just three years.

“So you majored in classical music, and that’s what eventually sparked your interest in pop music, but I’m curious as to what led you down this path. Was there any specific event that inspired you?” a Business Globe reporter asked Yeosang. “I realized that while blindness is both enchanting and noble, there are times it becomes a trap.” Yeosang answered vaguely before falling into thought.

After returning to this world, Yeosang could feel that the members had subtly, but definitely, changed. It was almost like finally realizing it was time to let go after blindly clinging to a one-sided love for so long. Before meeting the men in the black fedoras - before leaving World Z - they were boys, and now they’ve come out the other side of the tunnel as adults. Only when he was able to see how the members had changed, did Yeosang realize he too had grown.

Until now, their hard work and efforts towards their dreams felt noble because they blindly accepted those dreams as if they were divine missions entrusted to them alone. It felt like those dreams were the only right path. Therefore, living for anything other than those dreams seemed cowardly and shameful, like accepting defeat, and that is exactly how the members felt before leaving for World Z. They were caught in the trap of blindness.

However, while in World Z, they came to learn just how precious emotions, art, dreams and hopes all are, and at the same time, just how terrible blind belief can be. Upon returning to this world, the members agreed to continue pursuing their dreams as they always had, each of them holding the seed of new and diverse possibilities in their hearts. Yeosang knew this and believed that the members, consciously or not, must have felt the same.

While money might seem contrary to art, art would not exist without money. Historically, art was created for the enjoyment of nobles and aristocrats, and in protest of this truth, even more forms of art were born. Money was the group’s biggest obstacle in achieving their charred dream, and Yeosang decided to tackle it head-on. In only a short time, he reinvented himself as a leader of the investment world. While he focused on sure profits for the most part, occasionally he would invest in the arts, even if he risked losing money. One of those investments was Hongjoong’s novel.

## 05. San

“Growing up moving from place to place, I always dreamed of picking a spot and setting down roots for myself somewhere. But thinking back on it now, I think drifting may have been written in my life fortune right from the start.” San said to

himself, amid the salty wind of Jeju. The fixtures in the food truck rattled as if they were clapping back at San's words. His tanned skin showed just how long he'd wandered about.

As he watched the members go their separate ways one by one, San could neither hold them back nor storm out and leave them. He had nowhere else to go. One day, after a lackluster practice - with more than half of the members absent as they were too busy with their own lives - San found himself strolling down the alleyway, guided by his empty heart. He sat down on a small bench in front of a discreet old mom-and-pop corner store and cracked open a can of beer. "What do you call that feeling when you're not quite sad, but not quite happy? When you're sad but feel like your misery is almost laughable?" As he muttered to himself out of habit, he heard a voice beside him. "What's a youngster like yourself doing out here? It's not even night yet." It was the old man from the snack stall across the street. Instinctively, San asked him, "Hey mister, was it always your dream to run a snack stall?" The old man seemed to get mad, retorting, "Dreams? Hah, you do what you can to put food on the table." San asked again, "Do you think I can get by living without making my dreams come true?" The old man's eyes met with San's. "Dreams ain't bad, but there are lots of other, more important things in life. Sharing love, eating together, and cleaning up your own messes. Make sure you throw everything away right when you're done." At this, San noticed the black bag the old man had thrown at him earlier. Inside the bag were steamy fresh sun-dae and a roll of kimbap. The sight of a young man drinking beer on an empty stomach must have worried him.

Taking a bite of sun-dae, San begins talking to himself again. He decided that he wanted to know more about those other important things in life: "Sharing love, eating together... cleaning up your own messes." So, San started a food truck. As he wandered around, he saw people eat together and share delicious food with those they loved. And sometimes, San even ate and talked with them, too. He met a wide variety of people - dreamers, dream seekers, those whose dreams had changed or come true, those living outside their dream, and people with no dreams at all... That is how he came to learn the truth, the truth that most live their lives without ever achieving their dreams. 'So why didn't anyone ever teach us how to live outside of our dreams?' San thought. And he came to an answer on his own. Maybe I need to learn to welcome the reality I've been given, even if it's not the reality I wanted.

## 06. Mingi

People say, in this day and age, it's impossible to make it big unless you're born into good fortune from the start, but Mingi proved them wrong. On his way to the practice room, he got cast on the street by a high-end designer, and in no time had

made his debut in a fashion magazine as a professional model. Mingi, who was in a tough spot at the time, thought of it only as a lucrative part-time job, but that very magazine spread quickly caught the attention of famous brands and turned him into an in-demand model. He learned to walk the runway as easily as if it were a new dance. Soon he was walking for top brand fashion shows, decorating the cover of one of the world's four major fashion magazines, and working as an official ambassador for a global brand that called him their muse. The streets were filled with ads and videos featuring Mingi as their model.

As his van ran down the road decorated with his pictures - Mingi holding a hamburger, Mingi modeling cosmetics, Mingi in the trendiest new clothes - Mingi was once again preoccupied with his social media accounts. He was uploading the photo he had just taken in Garosu-gil as he moved on to his next schedule. By the time the fashion world had started to pay attention to Mingi, his OOTD looks were already popular on social media. His photos and unique styling that made inexpensive outfits look like luxury goods were popular among men as date outfit inspiration and among women as candid-cool boyfriend shots. Mingi had built a reputation for himself as an influencer. With each social media update came thousands, millions of likes and silly comments such as, 'You are so cool!', 'Do You guys know what Mingi's MBTI is? I.C.O.N.' Just then, another notification popped up among the rest: he'd just been paid an advertisement fee for last month's shoot. Even at a glance, he could tell it was a huge amount of money. Mingi was now so rich that his past struggles with poverty seemed like another lifetime ago. Above all, Mingi was glad that he didn't have to worry about his grandmother's hospital bills anymore. He might not be an idol, but being an icon like this was good enough for him.

Mingi realized just how narrow-minded and limited his view of the world had been. "Yeah, things are good now," he muttered to himself, gazing out the van window. His gaze was drawn to a group of boys busking on the street outside. The boys, who danced and sang clumsily but passionately met each other's eyes and laughed with each changing movement. Mingi was hypnotized by the group and stared at them blankly. As the red light turned to green and the car started again, the boys faded away into the distance. At that time, Mingi was overcome with the sense that he had crossed a river he could never cross again.

On the far side of that river were those times he had spent running recklessly, passionately toward his dreams, those times when it didn't matter if anyone acknowledged him, and it was enough to simply have fun. Where Mingi stood now was a place where results and achievements trumped passion and spirit, a place where value could be bought and sold. While Mingi wondered if 'this is what it must be like to become an adult,' he couldn't erase that vague feeling of longing. Just as

he opened up his social media to distract himself, a video of Hongjoong's reunion with his family appeared on his feed.

## 07. Wooyoung

If you were to ask him why he chose to be a flight attendant of all things, Wooyoung would answer with this:

A friend from my hometown once drunkenly said, "Is the stage really that special? A teacher's classroom could be their stage... The old man announcing sales at the supermarket is on stage... So are flight attendants giving presentations on emergency life vests! Idols and actors aren't the only ones giving performances on a stage!" Those words stuck with me and before I knew it, I had signed up for flight attendant training.

And, if you were to call him insane, he would retort: 'So what if I am?' In many ways, Wooyoung wasn't in his right mind at the time. All he knew was that he wanted a stage of his own, at that very moment. It didn't matter where.

Maybe it was some kind of post-travel side effect. Using the Cromer to fight Z and the Guardians, constantly moving around and performing, those were days that filled them with a rush of dopamine and adrenaline. Of course, those performances came with hardship and were part of a greater revolution, but a performance is a performance no matter what the cause. Wooyoung's jitters were always followed by a wave of excitement that shot energy through his nerves, so much so that he often found himself wondering, 'Was that really stage fright?'

But returning to World A, that excitement disappeared, and a looming feeling of anxiety began taking its place. It was as if he had finished an immersive game, and now, turning the console off, had to return to reality. Though Wooyoung and the members tried to do what they could, they would never be able to perform as they had as ATEEZ in World Z. Making a stage for themselves wasn't so easy here. Just when Wooyoung felt as though he'd never stand on stage again, his drunk friend offered him those words of comfort.

As someone who hates conflict and prefers to maintain peace, Wooyoung was well suited to his job as a flight attendant. His calming, pleasant face matched his uniform perfectly and he set passengers at ease as he welcomed them with an air of sophistication. While the plane prepares for take-off, the flight attendants move to their assigned positions and demonstrate how to wear seatbelts, respirators, and life jackets according to the announcement, but passengers rarely ever pay attention. To

remedy this, Wooyoung's airline was planning a new style of announcement more like an event, and Wooyoung volunteered to lead in place of the usual announcement, an exciting melody played over the cabin speakers. Passengers who had been sleeping or flipping through movies turned and looked with interest at Wooyoung and the crew standing in the aisleway. With practiced ease, Wooyoung delivered announcements, including the destination and flight time, through song, rap and dance. When the announcement was finished, the passengers broke out in applause. 'Exactly! This is what I'm made for!' Wooyoung thought with a bright smile. Wooyoung's eyes were drawn to a few people in the crowd who cheered and clapped louder than the rest.

It just so happened that Yunho and Mingi were on the exact same plane.

## 08. Jongho

While recording vocal guides as a part-time job, Jongho began studying songwriting and musical composition on his own and spent his days creating original songs. At first, he wrote songs that the members could record and practice together, but, as everyone got busy, it became harder and harder to work together as a group. For his convenience, Jongho began writing solo songs, and when becoming an idol with the members no longer seemed feasible, he turned to the path of a singer-songwriter. Jongho had already given up one dream due to injury - his dream of being a basketball player. He couldn't stand to lose another.

He had posted the songs he created on MusicCloud, when a major music label reached out, impressed with Jongho's songs. 'Will I finally be able to debut as a singer?' Jongho was excited, but as it turned out, the label was interested in an old group song he had uploaded long ago - a song he had recorded with the members - and wanted him to write a track for their upcoming idol group. While it was a bittersweet win, Jongho had no reason to refuse their offer. He would finally be able to make music his career and be recognized for his hard work. While Jongho started as a songwriter, it wasn't long before he was entrusted with the roles of idol vocal coach and producer as well. He was neither an idol nor a singer-songwriter, but he was satisfied. He was working alongside idols and singer-songwriters and that was enough for him. He had found a way to continue working with music. While Jongho was no longer the one standing in the spotlight, he was willing to become the deep darkness that made those on stage shine even brighter.

One Day, while recording with a second-year idol group, an argument broke out. What started with one member complaining, "I'm tired. I can't do this anymore," soon escalated into a full-fledged fight despite Jongho's best efforts to de-escalate

the situation. “Hey! If you were just going to give up on your dream like this, you shouldn’t have started in the first place!” Another member yelled. This riled up the first boy even more and he grabbed the member by the collar, spitting back, “What do you know? We might be stuck together every day, but don’t act like you know me!” Jongho stepped in and split up the boys before the fight turned physical, giving them each time to calm down. The boy who had complained burst into tears and cried, “I can’t tell you everything but, my family is going through a really hard time right now, and being away from them like this hurts so much.” Jongho did his best to comfort and sympathize with the distressed boy.

He was reminded of a time long ago when Mingi had threatened to quit, Jongho had gotten so mad that he had punched him in return. ‘I was so young and selfish back then,’ Jongho thought to himself. ‘How is everyone?’ Jongho recalled the other members. Sitting in the empty recording studio, he played that old group song and raised the volume. The sound of the members’ voices pierced through his heart.

## Golden Hour: Part 2

Disclaimer:

The Strictland Disposal Site and Dump was probably switched in this entry, since the Grimes Siblings’ voice was found in the Dump (as mentioned in [Fever Part 3](#)), not at the Disposal Site and mentioned here.

1. Share Love

2. Eat Together

3. Clean up your own mess.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you - What’s that thing you have stuck on there?”

A female student, stuffing a piece of buldak kimbap in her mouth, questioned.

“Is it the food truck’s motto? Or yours’ oppa?”

“Don’t call the store owner ‘oppa!’ Have some respect! I apologize for my daughter, sir.”

“Please, I call all handsome men oppa. And maybe you just came here for the first time today, Mom, but I’m a regular, Oppa and I are very close.”

The mother, embarrassed by her daughter’s shamelessness, smiled awkwardly as she met San’s eyes. He was busy gathering bite-sized pieces of bulgogi kimbap into a bowl.

San: "It's something the owner of some snack stall told me three years or so ago when I was worried that my dreams might not come true. Dreams are fine and all, but there are many other, more important things in life.

"Like... sharing love, eating together... and cleaning up your own mess."

As if pondering the meaning of what San just said, the female student read the memo aloud. For the first time in a long while, San also looked at the old memo posted on the inside wall of his food truck. It was the first thing he stuck to its inner walls after buying the used truck three years ago, when the members, one by one, had started moving on their own paths. He started this food truck wanting to know if - like the owner of that stall said - a life outside of one's dreams was worth living.

"So running a food truck like this wasn't your dream?"

The female student asked.

San: "If I'm being honest, no it wasn't. Not really."

"Does that make you sad? That you're doing something other than your dream?"

The girl's mother tried to interject, but San just laughed, saying it was okay.

San: "No, I like it. Of course, there are still times I miss those moments..."

The girl spoke loudly as if to tell her mother to listen.

"See! So you can live happily without achieving your dreams! My mom always says you have to achieve your dreams, that a life without achieving your dreams is a life wasted, and so I have to study! Always study, study, study. Her nagging drives me crazy."

"Enough! Stop eating, and go to your after-school classes! Sorry for all the trouble, sir. The food was great!"

The mother, no longer able to hold back and wary of the ongoing conversation, finally stood up and urged her daughter away. San watched as the female student stuffed her cheeks full of the remaining kimbap, still chewing it as her mother dragged her away. He smiled.

San: "I used to think that too."

A new customer approached, and San greeted them with a friendly face. Seeing the expectant faces of hungry customers as they ordered, making food he hoped they'd

enjoy, and watching them eat until they were full and happy - There's a kind of happiness in this, too, San thought.

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Meanwhile, a plane bound for Incheon was getting ready to take off in Dubai. Wooyoung, a second-year flight attendant, was busy preparing the special safety announcement he had put together for K Airlines. The airlines, concerned that passengers weren't paying enough attention to the flight attendants' in-flight safety announcement, planned a new event based on an idea of Wooyoung's in place of the usual simple demonstration.

While he knew all he needed to do was match a few small movements to the announcements's song and rap, Wooyoung's mouth had gone dry from nervousness - It had been a long time since he'd been on stage. He clenched his hands into a fist, stretched them slowly, and shook them out, but it did nothing to help calm his nerves. Taking a deep breath, Wooyoung closed his eyes.

He recalled those times - three years ago from now - when the members, dressed in black fedoras, would perform as they used the Cromer to disappear and reappear in and out of space. It was a time when his stage fright had felt like a distant memory from a past life. Yes, he had acted with a sense of duty, wanting to save the people from Z's control, but it was more than that. Those dreams of his that were out of grasp in World A, were achievable in World Z. There, the world was his stage, and each and every performance was thrilling. The performances of Wooyoung and the members reminded the people, whose emotions had been suppressed and controlled, of the feelings they had lost. Their reactions, full of laughter and tears, had ignited Wooyoung's heart.

Z, backed into a corner, broke the Cromer in his attempt to flee, and, as a result, Wooyoung and the members were thrown back into this world before they could see the climax of their movement. But it was fine. If he could do all that there, there was nothing he couldn't do here, too, Wooyoung thought. The members came together again and prepared as a performance group. Jongho, who was studying music composition, wrote their songs, and Hongjoong and Mingi came up with the lyrics. Wooyoung and Yunho put together the choreography. Yeosang, who - thanks to his investments - had the most money to spare, set up their practice room, and Seonghwa and San oversaw the planning and marketing. Through busking and performances at small, local events, they did their best to make even one fan.

But that was the extent of it. And as days without progress dragged on, the members' motivation slowly began to fade. Their dreams didn't, in fact, lead to any

real jobs. Like a long-dead romance waiting for one side to finally let go, their days dragged on in a state of arrested development, and the members' worries only grew. We used to fly high as ATEEZ in World Z, but had fallen into obscurity in this place. It was impossible to stop the members, who urgently needed money to get by, from leaving to look for a part-time job and earn a living. Though no one said it out loud, they all felt that the days when they could persuade each other with the mere promise of their shared dream would soon pass. Back then, whenever he went out to drink with friends from his hometown, Wooyoung would whine over and over about how he wanted to be on stage. Then one time, his friend drunkenly shot back:

"Is the stage really that special? A teacher's classroom could be their stage... The old man announcing sales at the supermarket is on stage... So are the flight attendants giving presentations on emergency life vests! Idols and actors aren't the only ones giving performances on a stage!"

Wooyoung, thinking this was just his friend's way of shutting him up, disregarded the comment. But his friend went on:

"If you miss performing that much, then stop whining about it and do something! Go find your own stage!"

Fueled by his friend's call for him to take action, Wooyoung's blood boiled and a strange courage overcame him. "That's right! I'll go find my own stage!" The friends cheered together and, before he knew it, Wooyoung had signed up for flight attendant training.

Not wanting to waste the money he had spent on FA training classes, Wooyoung began attending the flight attendant academy. To his surprise, he was praised for his talent and soon found himself enjoying training. He was proud that the other students applauded him and the school held him up as an example. Yes, maybe it was praise that Wooyoung had wanted. Driven by praise and recognition, Wooyoung became a full-fledged flight attendant in record time. It wasn't until after this thirst for acknowledgment had been quenched that he remembered what it was that he really wanted to do: music. It wasn't performing on a stage, but music that he wanted to do. To match his voice and movements to instruments, for someone to listen to his story. But when he finally looked back, he was already an established flight attendant. And so Wooyoung recalled his friend's words again. "Find the stage. Find your own stage..." "Make it for yourself..."

At that time, K Airlines was in the process of planning a new format for their in-flight safety announcement, and Wooyoung sent in a proposal for the project. He suggested a music-based performance, and his idea was adopted.

“Wooyoung, we’re just about ready to run the announcement.”

At the words of his fellow flight attendant, Wooyoung opened his eyes. It might not be much, but it was still a stage, the stage Wooyoung had longed for. This shaking feeling he was experiencing now was the very feeling he had missed so much. There was nothing to be afraid of, Wooyoung stood in the aisle.

Wooyoung: “We’re about to take off. In preparation for departure, please direct your attention to the flight attendants in the cabin as they go over our safety procedures.”

Wooyoung’s announcement rang over the pre-recorded music playing from the in-flight speakers. Soon, the beat began to change and the announcement transformed into a rap and melody. Passengers who had been dozing off, or scrolling through the selection of in-flight movies, and children who had been whining to their parents, all turned to look at Wooyoung.

Information on seat belts, life jackets, oxygen masks, and emergency exits was delivered through witty lyrics, and the communicative performance immediately drew the attention of the audience - the flight’s passengers. Even those who had laughed out of awkwardness at first, soon joined in on the fun of the performance. Some even stood up from their seats, swayed their shoulders, and clapped. The youngest audience enjoyed the performance the most, as they stopped their crying and laughed along. Some passengers even filmed the performance on their personal smartphones.

Wooyoung, who felt like he hadn’t performed before an audience in so long, ended the in-flight safety performance by disappearing and reappearing in an instant like he used to do in World Z - Of course, without the Cromer it was just a simple trick of diversion planned with a fellow flight attendant.

After a moment of silence, the cabin burst into thunderous applause and cheers. All around, passengers shouted praise at Wooyoung, saying, “This is the best announcement I’ve ever seen!” or “I’m so glad I got to start my vacation with you!” and “I was sad about my holiday being over, but you made me feel so much better!” Wooyoung, who was busy thanking - and calming - the passengers who were now more excited than he was, stopped in front of two familiar faces.

Yunho: “Hey, is it really okay for a safety announcement to be this cool?”

Mingi: “I know. I fell for him and nearly asked for his number.”

It was Yunho and Mingi.

The K Airlines flight crossed the night sky and the bright lights of the cabin dimmed. Passengers, tired from the long flight, began to fall asleep. Aside from the noise of a few odd people going to and from the restroom, the cabin was quiet. The three men gathered in one corner in hushed excitement.

Wooyoung: "Huh. What're the odds?"

Mingi: "I was supposed to take an earlier flight home after the fashion show in Dubai, but it was overbooked. I needed to get back for our appointment tomorrow, and this was the next best flight I could get."

Wooyoung: "And there were only economy seats left? What if someone recognizes you!"

Mingi: "I was worried about that, too, but this was the last one open before the weekend. Still, it worked out. Right? I get to see you and Yunho!"

Even though they were in the galley, where only flight attendants came and went, Mingi covered his face with his hat and stayed alert for prying eyes. Within just three years, Mingi had become the hottest model and influencer in the world.

Back when the members were still practicing together, Mingi, who needed money for his grandmother's hospital bills and family's living expenses, began taking on a number of odd jobs. On his way to the practice room, Mingi was cast on the street by a high-end designer - the brand was still in its start-up stage at the time - who was looking for a new face to model for them. Mingi was selected to star in a pictorial introducing the brand's new collection.

That season's outfits and pictorials became a hot topic in the fashion world online, so much so that Mingi was even featured on the cover of one of the world's top fashion magazines. He was hailed as a muse to global brands and was chosen to finish their collections' runway shows - though he had no experience walking whatsoever. As the saying goes: Those who can, do. Those who can do it looking good? Well, they go on to rule the world. A YouTuber with over 1 million subscribers posted Mingi's photos on their personal SNS as an example of their ideal boyfriend's style, and it soon ignited a heated social debate on the use of private images without permission. Like this, Mingi's pictures naturally gained exposure, and, as the original controversy surrounding them disappeared, he evolved into a famous figure associated in the public mind with the so-called boyfriend shot."

Yunho: 'After the conference in Egypt, I was on my way back to Korea via Dubai. When I saw it was a K Airlines flight, I thought of contacting you, Wooyoung, but who knew we'd end up meeting like this! And Mingi too!

Yunho had started studying again and went on to college, and the Cromer was the reason why. Once he'd learned that the Cromer - something he'd thought could only be found in the mystical World Z - existed here, as well, he became fascinated with relics, ancient ruins, legends, and myths. "There must be more relics out there, just like Cromer, that can't be explained by our world's history, theory, and research alone." Yunho said.

Wooyoung was reminded of a conversation he had one day walking with Yunho. If this world is really made up of multiple dimensions, just as the men in the black fedoras had told them, then there must be more relics and artifacts out there that only those who know of World Z can recognize.

'Does he want to go back to World Z? Now that the Cromer's broken, is he looking for some other key that will lead him back?'

Wooyoung wanted to ask Yunho a lot of questions, but chose to cheer him on instead. Entering the archaeological department must have been hectic enough for him already.

Yunho: "By the way, you were really cool back there. It reminded me of when we used to perform together as ATEEZ."

Mingi: "I filmed it all on my phone, so let's rewatch it together at Yeosang's place tomorrow."

Wooyoung: "Hey, it's supposed to be Hongjoong's congratulatory party. Don't waste time watching a video of me."

Yunho: "Why not? I'm sure everyone will love it. We always end up talking about the past when we meet, anyway. If anything, I'm worried your video will get everyone too fired up and they'll want to start dancing again."

Mingi: "He's not wrong, and you know what? Jongho's a producer now. Who knows, he might just offer you a solo after watching it."

Wooyoung: "Cut it out. Stop messing with me."

Mingi smirked mischievously as if to say "try me" and Wooyoung responded with a look of fake hurt. Yunho watched them both and laughed. Though it'd been a year since they last met, and though they each now had their own busy lives, in front of each other they transformed into the same young boys they had always been. With silly jokes only they would ever get, they soothed their longing for each other that had long been locked away inside.

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At the same time, in Seoul, South Korea. Cursing and shouting, not music, blasted out of a recording studio near Hongdae.

“If that’s how you’re gonna act, then get the hell out already! Stop dragging us into your mess. Do you know how many idols disappear not even a year after debuting? Even if we fucking risk our lives for this job, who knows how many people will ever actually care!”

“No, that’s not what I - For starters, I joined this company because I thought they’d make me an actor. Hell, like I knew I’d become an idol like this! Ha... Don’t act like you know what I’m going through.”

The six-month-old group, for which Jongho worked as their executive producer, was preparing for their upcoming mini album. While in the studio recording songs, all the member’s volatile emotions that had accumulated since their debut exploded into an argument, which raged on despite the best efforts of those around them to stop it. An engineer, who could no longer stand to watch the children fight in this recording booth moved to stop them, but Jongho stepped in and held him back.

Jongho: “It’s better they let it all out now than hold it in and suffer in silence.”

It wouldn’t be easy for family members to work together all day long - let alone young adults, teens who had barely just hit puberty, thrown together only because they share the same goal. Understanding Jongho’s intentions, the engineer sat down again. And, unaware of the adults watching them, the children continued to fight.

“What?! If you didn’t want to be part of this, you should have told the company before debuting! Let me guess, you didn’t have the guts to start out as an actor and thought you’d take the easy path to fame by debuting as an idol first. If that’s what you decided, then take responsibility for that decision! You’re an idol now, so fucking work to make your face known before whining! You’ve only just started, and you’re already like this?! What’re you going to do?”

“What do you think I am? Some kind of machine? I’m human, too. I need time to think through all my troubles and decisions. But, it’s just work and practice, work and practice every. single. day. I don’t have time to think about myself or make commitments. Considering all that, can’t I waiver or doubt things a little?”

Jongho: “At this rate, I doubt we’ll be able to finish recording today. There’s still room in the schedule, so let’s try again some other time.”

The boys argument showed no sign of slowing down and Jongho decided to postpone the recording. The engineer headed out of the studio first, offering Jongho a comment of support for his troubles on his way out.

“And you think we aren’t just as busy? What do you think the rest of us are doing? Playing around?”

“You’ve never liked me, even back when we were trained. Is that why you’re acting like this to me?”

“What?!”

“You always listen to the other members whenever they complain about their troubles. Whether it was family stuff, not being able to debut with friends from their trainee days, or anything else.”

“... Seriously? How old are you?”

Jongho: “That’s enough. Everyone, get out of here.”

Once the other members had all left for the dorms, the two boys sat in front of Jongho and cried. Jongho guessed they each had been holding on to their own struggles.

One of the boys, having come from a difficult family background, was desperate to cling to his idol career - something he had worked so hard to achieve - and the opportunities it might bring. As desperate as he was, he was also probably anxious. And ,the only way to relieve his worries in this industry where the future was both uncertain and out of his hands, was to work as hard as he possibly could. He must have hoped the other members would feel the same, and when confronted by his friend who didn’t, could no longer hold back his own overflowing anxiety. Although Jongho didn’t know everything the boy had been through, he did know the feeling of desperation born from anxiety. He had once exploded at Mingi in a similar way.

The other boy, who dreamed of becoming an actor, must have stumbled across the path of an idol on the way to his real dream. While he may have started this career hoping that, as his face became more well known, it would eventually lead to opportunities in acting, he was probably taken aback by the reality of this world that demands hard work paid in sweat and tears. He was behind in singing and dancing compared to the other members, who dreamed of being idols, and he must have been worried about the choice he made. But, as busy as they were, it would have been hard to even bring up his concerns. Sure, one could criticize the boy for choosing the path of an idol when that was never his dream. But Jongho, who had become a music producer as a means to achieving another goal himself, was no different.

As their crying died down, Jongho recalled these past three years. Inspired by the Grimes Siblings, Jongho began composing music little by little and when they returned to this world, he began studying it in earnest, hoping to make songs the members could sing together. While it was a little awkward, he enjoyed asking the members' opinions and modifying each song little by little. That magical moment, when the members' voices were paired with the melody he'd made, brought a sense of accomplishment he had not felt elsewhere. Even when the other members grew busy with their own lives, Jongho couldn't let go of the music. Jongho had already been forced to give up his dream - basketball - once due to injury, and had worked so hard to find this new one. If he couldn't achieve it with the members, he would find a way to cling to it on his own, even as a singer-songwriter.

That's how Jongho was eventually scouted by his current agency, who was so impressed by the songs he uploaded to MusicCloud, that they asked if he could write a song for their upcoming idol group. While he was a bit disappointed they hadn't offered to sign him as a singer, he had no reason to refuse the offer. It was a way for him to continue his career in music, and, for the first time, his efforts had been recognized. Jongho, who started as a songwriter, soon became the idol group's vocal coach and producer, as well. He was neither an idol nor a singer-songwriter, but he had hope that, as long as he never gave up on music, the chance would still present itself one day. For now, he spent his days satisfied with the opportunities given to him.

Jongho: "From now on, how about we work out from time to time and try building up our physical strength."

The two children raised their heads and looked up at Jongho, confused.

Jongho: "Neither of you wants to hurt the other, it's just that you have your problems, and you have yours. Am I right?"

They nodded and, out of the corner of their eyes, scanned the face of the boy sitting next to them. As their irritation faded, fatigue, sadness, confusion and guilt took its place.

Jongho: "I heard that kindness also requires stamina. You're both so tired that you're overcome with anxiety and confusion. But it's thanks to all your hard work that you were able to debut and were offered all these new opportunities, too. I know it's impossible to really understand each other's struggles, but let's at least try to be kinder to each other. How about it?"

The boys replied “yes” at the same time, and awkwardly handed each other tissues. “They’re still just kids,” Jongho thought as he smiled quietly. The two boys, who had fought so ferociously until just now, were smirking and exchanging friendly banter. Looking at them, Jongho couldn’t help but be reminded of his own members.

He went to close his eyes for a moment, but fatigue washed over him and, before he knew it, it was 1 am. Jongho hurried to organize his computer files, and buried among those numerous files, one in particular caught his eye: It was his first song. Maybe it was the boys’ fight, or that he was going to see his own members for the first time in a while tomorrow, but for some reason, that song - which he had not played once since they split - called out to him today. “Should I try listening to it again?” Jongho hesitated for a moment before mustering up a little courage and playing that first song.

Jongho: “Hmm... Yeah I can’t do this.”

Jongho shuddered at the melody which now seemed so unrefined from its very start. In his memory, it had been a pretty good song, but now he realized how much he had glamourized it. Unable to listen anymore, he went to turn the music off, but hesitated at Yeosang’s soft voice. Then Wooyoung’s melodic voice followed and Jongho gave up on turning off the music. As Yeosang and Wooyoung, Seonghwa and Yunho, Mingi and Hongjoong, San and Jongho’s voices came and went, an image as clumsy as a colorful drawing unfolded in his mind. The members’ voices pierced his heart. It felt as though, unknowingly, he had unleashed a certain long-gone and now unattainable past.

Only then did Jongho realize that he had unwittingly ended one period of his life and started another. Listening to the music of a past he could never get back, he longed for those clumsy but oh-so-beautiful times, and shed a tear.

It was then, RINGGG! A fire alarm went off and shook Jongho from his memories. “Wha-What’s going on?!” Jongho faltered at the loud noise, and someone burst through the recording studio door. Standing in the open doorway was none other than Seonghwa - outfitted in fire protective gear.

Jongho: “Seonghwa...?”

Seonghwa: “Can’t you hear the alarm?! Hurry! We need to get out of here!”

A stray cigarette butt had caught fire to a bag of garbage, which in turn spread to the vines that decorated the outer wall of the building. The fire grew and began eating away at the building’s exterior. “Fortunately, a delivery man saw it all and

immediately called 119. We were able to extinguish the fire before there was too much damage,” Seonghwa continued as he took off his red helmet.

Seonghwa: “Thankfully, the fire didn’t spread too much, but had you stayed there you might have been suffocated by the smoke. The next time you hear a fire alarm go off, get out right away. There’s nothing more important than your life.”

Jongho: “Yes, yes, I get it. You’re really a full-fledged firefighter now, huh?”

Jongho smiled happily at Seonghwa’s nagging, which he hadn’t heard in so long, and handed Seonghwa a drink. Seonghwa smiled back, as if he had missed these familiar interactions with the group’s youngest member. Looking at Seonghwa’s soot-smudged face, Jongho asked.

Jongho: “How’s the firefighter job? Do you enjoy it?”

Seonghwa finished another sip of his drink and seemed to think for a moment, before replying with a smile.

Seonghwa: “It’s great! Very rewarding. But more importantly, I get to save people. It’s really great.”

Jongho understood. He knew that the afterimage of all the people they couldn’t save in World Z had long haunted Seonghwa. The Boy and his Brother that they were unable to save at the Disposal Site. The many members of the Black Pirates and Thunder who had fought bravely alongside ATEEZ only to have their fates changed by the Guardians’ attacks. The eyes of those Sense Offenders hung as an example in the square. Jongho remembered that image of Seonghwa’s back, the older member frozen in place each and every time he encountered someone who reminded him of them.

Seonghwa: “Want me to tell you something interesting?”

Jongho met his eyes silently, as if to say that he was ready to listen. Seonghwa began describing those who had just become firefighters. There is a time when a sense of duty and a desire to save people becomes a kind of “passion” in and of itself. During this time, new firefighter - as if they have never known fear - would do anything to save even just one more person. They would dive into the heart of a fire or risk their lives. Then, they make a mistake and realize they might actually die like this. That’s when they finally come to understand their seniors’ advice, Seonghwa continued.

Seonghwa: “Saving oneself is the first step in saving other people.”

Seonghwa: "Believe it or not, that's why I decided to become a firefighter. I thought that if I could just pull myself out of my own misery, I would be able to do anything."

At first, he began studying how to rescue people in various crisis situations. Just learning how to react to various emergencies helped calm his anxiety. Then, while studying, he came across material made for aspiring firefighters preparing for the firefighter exam. The members were meeting to practice together less and less, and making use of his new-found free time, Seonghwa decided to take the test himself. The hobby he began to calm his anxiety, soon became his job. He found its specific demands and tasks were more comforting than vague dreams. And while it didn't come with cheers and applause like performing on stage, in their place, he was rewarded with the simple, heartfelt gratitude of those he'd saved and their families.

Jongho: "That's good to hear."

Jongho meant that sincerely. He looked at Seonghwa's face in the clear light. Seonghwa stared back at Jongho in the same manner. Jongho, the baby of the group, suddenly looked all grown up. "Even Jongho's an adult now. It's strange. It makes me feel proud, but also sorry." Seonghwa Thought quietly to himself.

Jongho: "You're coming tomorrow, right?"

Seonghwa: "Nope."

Jongho: "Wait, really? Why can't you come? This'll be our first time getting together in nearly a year."

Seonghwa: "It's already past midnight. So yeah, I won't be going tomorrow, but I'll be sure to make the party today. It's Hongjoong's party - there's no way I'd miss it."

Jongho: "Oh, come on!"

In Jongho's face, now annoyed at the older boy's mischief, was the echo of the maknae Seonghwa knew. Only then did Seonghwa put his arm around Jongho's shoulders and ruffle his hair, as if happy to finally reunite with the group's youngest.

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In an antique villa, far removed from the city center and hidden by lush trees tinted by the pink light of golden hour, laughter echoed about. Inside the villa dining room, eight men dressed comfortably sat around a large table decorated with all kinds of dishes from land and sea. Eight wine glasses collided in the air.

Yeosang: "I really put a lot of thought into this menu for you guys, but all you've been eating is San's stuff. I'm hurt."

San: "That's bold coming from the guy who just swiped another piece of my kimbap."

Yeosang: "Well, you know. You can't beat this kind of nostalgic flavor."

Wooyoung: "Come on guys, let's try one of the other dishes before Mr. Fancy Villa Owner gets upset."

Hongjoong: "How did you manage to look this sexy on a plane? I thought I was watching a performance of Britney Spears' Toxic or something"

Wooyoung: "Hey! I thought I told you guys not to show them that!"

Mingi and Yunho, shrugging in fake remorse, explained how they had no choice but to show the other Wooyoung's video, which had already begun spreading on social media. Wooyoung's ears were red with embarrassment, but he looked through the video's comments in high spirits, and San took the opportunity to tease Wooyoung again. Hongjoong, who had been watching the members with a smile, suddenly remembered the books in his bag and hurriedly took them out. He passed a copy to each of the members, who flipped through them with thrill. On the first page was a simple letter with Hongjoong's handwritten signature.

Yunho: "So book no. 2 is finally out! Congrats, Hongjoong! You did great!"

Mingi: "I heard you were already offered licensing deals in 30 countries or something? I saw it in an article."

Hongjoong: "It's all thanks to you guys. If anything I'm sorry. It's our story, but I'm the only one making money off of it all."

Jongho: "What're you saying? You're the only one of us who'd ever be able to retell it all in such an exciting way like this."

The others nodded in agreement. For no reason in particular, Hongjoong touched the cover of his book. On the cover was an image of Z's office, with Z and the Guardians on the right, and the Thunder members and Prestige Academy students on the left. In front were eight men wearing black fedoras, engraved with the name ATEEZ. That's right - Hongjoong's novel was based on their real adventures. In short: it was his and the members' travel diary.

One day, after returning to this world, Hongjoong suddenly realized that his memories from World Z were beginning to fade. Perhaps that's what it meant to live in the present. What were once vibrant and colorful memories, would soon be condensed into a single color and simplified as "good past times." And so, Hongjoong began writing. He wanted to retain those magical moments that he could never visit again as vibrant memories. His diary, a blog, was soon filled with comments like, "Is this a new novel? I'm dying to read what comes next!"

For the first time, Hongjoong began to consider how the series of events he had experienced with members might seem to others. "Most people would probably assume this is a science fiction or fantasy novel, not a travelog." What began as

Hongjoong's diary, evolved into a detailed story akin to an epic novel, and his blog readers increased exponentially as the story progressed. It wasn't long before he was approached by a publisher, and his story was printed as a novel, which went on to become a bestseller. Before he knew it, Hongjoong had built a name for himself as a famous writer beloved by young readers,

His days were filled with reader meet and greets, special lectures, and appearances on various TV programs. On a talk show that introduces writers' personal lives, Hongjoong said, "I originally dreamed of becoming an idol, hoping vaguely that, if I become famous enough to appear on TV, I might meet my long-lost family again. But I never imagined that this would all happen to me as a writer." His sincere story - and the dance he showed off at the request of the host - became a hot topic. Hongjoong's father, who happened to watch the show, and his mother, who learned about him through his novel, reached out to him. At long last, his dream of reuniting with his family finally came true.

Hongjoong: "My mom is so into Mingi these days. She even follows you on social media."

Mingi: "Really? Do you want me to surprise her with a video call or something? I'd be more than happy to."

Seonghwa: "In that case, would you mind calling my fire department chief as well? Ever since he found out we're close, he's been too nice to me."

The members burst into laughter seeing Hongjoong's mother fangirling over Mingi on the phone. Seonghwa tried to contact the department chief for a video call with Mingi, as well, but, busy as ever, he didn't answer his phone. Mingi left a little video greeting for him instead.

San: "I saw so many ads with Mingi on my way here today. He's everywhere! Do you know what it made me think of?"

Jongho: "What?"

San: "It's so over the top, it almost reminds me of Z."

Jongho, looking around Yeosang's villa, laughed at San's joke. It was an inside joke that only made sense to those familiar with World Z and the nature of Z's rule. It also meant that Mingi's star power was so great that it was akin to brainwashing.

The dining room let out into a short hallway that connected to the living room. Beyond a large window framed by curtains was a dark, blue night. Next to the window, in an antique cabinet, a familiar frame and broken glass object caught Wooyoung's eyes.

Wooyoung: "Hey, isn't this the Cromer?"

The remaining pieces of the broken Cromer, which Yeosang had taken back with him, had been reconstructed decently well. It looked almost like a piece of modern art. When the Cromer shattered and the members were forced back to this world, Wooyoung had thought Yeosang odd for picking up its useless broken pieces. Now, Wooyoung felt as though he were the odd one.

Yunho: "Huh? Wait, I think I recognize that. It's that thing Left Eye gave us!"

Yunho cried out, looking at a ruby-colored stone in a compartment next to the Cromer.

Jongho: "It's that thing! That- He gave it to us saying it was something thrown away at the Strictland Disposal Site along with the voices of the Grimes Siblings."

San: "Yeosang, you mean you took this without telling the rest of us?"

Yeosang: "What're you talking about? I asked you over and over which one of us should take it."

Everyone was shocked by Yeosang's sudden remarks. Yeosang continued, "I asked you all again and again in both World Z and World A, but either you weren't listening or changed the subject on me. I had no choice but to bring it back myself." When the members questioned "When? When did you ask us?" Yeosang replied:

Yeosang: "Don't you remember me asking you all 'What should we do with Sopro?'" (Sopro. Portuguese for 'breath', 'a gust of air.')

Wooyoung: "Sopro?"

At that, the members finally recalled Yeosang asking them, "Who's going to take care of Sopro?" "What about Sopro?" "Guys, Sopro..." None of them knew at the time that he was referring to this ruby stone, and they all had brushed him off. Now feeling bad, the members touched Sopro aimlessly and changed the subject.

San: "You know, Yeosang, your villa really is huge. It's so nice! You can really tell you make a lot of money."

Seonghwa: "I know. You've got enough room to play soccer in here."

The members chided Seonghwa for his old man-like comment, and looked around the living room.

In just three years, Yeosang had become the definition of Young and Rich, Tall and Handsome. Having built his fortune investing in stocks, Yeosang was finally able to start a business of his own without his father's help. The start-up he generously invested in grew into a unicorn, and through his careful investment skills, he was able to transform the small, one-man business into a large-scale operation. Though he didn't want to admit it, his natural ability to read the flow of money reminded him of his father. While money might seem contrary to art, art would not exist without money. Historically, art was created for the enjoyment of nobles and aristocrats, and in protest of this truth, even more kinds of art were born. Money was the group's biggest obstacle in achieving their dream, and Yeosang decided to tackle it head-on. He reinvented himself as a leader of the investment world.

The members who had naturally moved to the living room, shared stories with each other, drank wine, and drunkenly reminisced about their times in World Z, their memories spread out on the table before them. Their uncensored true faces, which they had grown used to hiding behind masks as refined members of society, burst out wildly. The members were as excited as if they had just moved through space with the Cromer - as if they'd gone back to their days as the men in the Black Fedoras.

Yeosang: "Do you guys remember that time? Back during our performance at Prestige Academy, when Mingi missed the beat and his colored smoke bomb went off first?"

San: "Yeah. I was worried that I was the one who messed up our rhythm."

Hongjoong: "To be honest, I was worried we wouldn't be able to make it home. I kept thinking, what if one of us got injured or something happened... Everything seemed so hard at the time, but looking back on it now - things were good back then."

Wooyoung: "I know. I remember that first time I got injured and how the Grimes Siblings helped me. The first time we met Left Eye... I almost even miss the Guardians now."

San: "I hope Thunder's doing okay. It's a shame we never got a chance to say goodbye."

Yunho: "I wonder what happened after we left. Were the people finally able to break free of control, did the rebellion succeed... Do they still remember ATEEZ? Or, do you think we've already been forgotten?"

Mingi: "Maybe, you never know. Time keeps moving over there too. We might already have become a thing of the past. It's not like we spend all our time thinking about ATEEZ either."

Jongho: "Even if that's the case, it's still a little sad to think about."

There was a moment of silence. Although they were all here in the same place, each member was immersed in their own thoughts. Music filled the room, breaking the

silence. It was Jongho. He played a song from the music he had kept from their performances in World Z. Excitement filled the room again. Some members even started to dance, saying they remembered their choreography from back then. A few other songs played, and, finally, the first song Jongho had written for the members upon returning came on.

This time, a different kind of silence came over the members. ATEEZ, who had been nothing short of heroes in World Z, had been thrown back into World A and forced to live as commoners again. Still, they had been so sure they could make it here, too. After all, just think of all they had accomplished in World Z! However, the lingering thrill of their adventures had faded faster than they had hoped. This song was one they sang together at the very end of that time. They hadn't understood just how much they had changed before and after leaving World Z, but now they all did.

Wooyoung: "Why don't we give it one last try?"

Wooyoung blurted out the thoughts no other member had the courage to speak, not even as a joke. Sipping his drink by himself and listening to music, he looked very drunk. Hongjoong responded as if to soothe him:

Hongjoong: "Ahahaha, yeah, that might be fun. You know, a reader actually said the same thing at a book concert of mine a while back. They said they'd heard us perform at a local event a long time ago. They were a fan. It kind of made me sad to hear that."

Yun ho: "You know, Yeosang makes a lot of investments in the arts. He could probably handle our production. And Jongho can make our songs. And Mingi will be our center?"

"It's so nice getting together like this. We should really do it at least once a month. Hey, you know, let's go on a trip together sometime!" The others tried to brush aside Wooyoung's words with their usual drunken promises, but this time Jongho responded seriously:

Jongho: "To be honest, I like the idea. I already have some songs written."

Wooyoung: "Looking back, I always wondered if we really did everything we could. At first, we all had our own family problems, and because of that, we ended up drifting apart before we ever really started. Then, the next time we got together and tried and it didn't work out, we all gave up so easily and moved on to our own jobs. Let's do it for real this time. Give it one last go. Doesn't it bother you? To just accept defeat like this?"

Wooyoung thought he had been adjusting well to his life as a flight attendant. But when he danced and sang to the in-flight safety announcement, he realized that was not the case. He had been forcing himself to eat tofu, when what he really wanted was steak. Sure they were both proteins, but they were not the same.

Yeosang: "I don't consider my current life to be 'defeat.'"

Wooyoung: "So, then, you think we've all achieved our dreams?"

Yeosang: "Let me put it this way: You think life that doesn't follow your original dream is a failure, then? Something to be ashamed of?"

The members grew pale at the suddenly charged atmosphere of the conversation.

Yeosang was frustrated with Wooyoung, who clung blindly to his obsession with dreams. And while blindness is at times both enchanting and noble, there are other times when it becomes a trap. The reason why hard work and effort put towards one's dream feel so noble, is that dreams can often seem like a sort of divine mission - and many people blindly accept them as such.

If you believe that the only way to live is to follow your dreams, it's only natural that anything else would feel frightening and shameful, like a failure. The sense of defeat the members felt before arriving in World Z was that exactly - the trap of blindness. But what they learned in World Z was not that they could be heroes, but the importance of emotions and art, dreams and hope. And that blind belief in anything leads to grave consequences. At least, that's how Yeosang saw it, and he had hoped the members felt the same.

Yeosang: "Grow up. How long do you plan on acting so recklessly?"

"Until we fail for good, I want to keep giving it my all" "We never really tried." "You're just running away, afraid to face the fact that we've fallen this far, and using the need to 'make a living' as an excuse." "Your real failure is being afraid to fail." These words echoed in Wooyoung's mind. But, Yeosang's cold and cynical retort shattered him before he was ever able to sort through his thoughts.

Wooyoung: "Maybe it's that you don't even have the courage to be reckless. But the others might. Why are you getting in my way without even listening?"

Yeosang: "Can't you tell?"

Yeosang stood up from his seat as if to say, "Go ahead. Ask." Wooyoung looked at the other members, believing that at least one of them would respond positively, "Let's try it again together." But each member only turned their eyes away from Wooyoung's gaze, Wooyoung felt like a fool.

Jongho: "Wooyoung, I really did mean it. I want to... but let's organize our schedules first and then..."

Wooyoung: "No, forget it. This was supposed to be a celebration, and I messed everything up. I'm sorry guys. I'm just a little drunk... I'll head out first..."

Pressing back his tears, he kicked away his seat and stood up. The members rushed over to comfort Wooyoung and his broken heart, but it was too late. Wooyoung walked away quickly into the darkness.

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There were two hours left before the first train. Wooyoung, forced to wait until then, shivered as he sat down on the bench at the train station. "Ugh, why does he have to live so far out of the city." It was late spring, but the night was still cold. Wooyoung regretted running out of Yeosang's villa so hastily. He debated buying some apology snacks at the convenience store and returning to the villa, but no matter how he thought about it, returning to Yeosang's house would only hurt his pride.

Wooyoung: "Is being reckless a crime? There are so many reckless people in the world. Like all the people who fall in love knowing they'll break up in the end. Does he think they're all just immature fools? And why is recklessness immature?"

He talked to himself and tried to calm his stormy heart. Yeosang's words were made even more painful by the other members' gazes. They seemed to imply: "We are not the same." It was as though he alone remained trapped in a long tunnel and the members looked back at him from the other side, as if saying, "Why are you still here?"

Wooyoung: "Since when did they all become so spineless? Their passion, spirit... where did it all go?"

Wooyoung tilted his head back and looked up at the night. Even in the murky sky, stars shone. "Could one of those lights be World Z?" As he thought that, a reddish star appeared, twinkling through the clouds.

Wooyoung: "Sopro."

Wooyoung unconsciously was reminded of the ruby-colored stone. The stone that sat in the living room cabinet of Yeosang's villa.

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“Sopro is a sort of magical spirit that synchronizes the feelings of those who hold it with those who draw breath around them. According to legend, one of the four priest guardians of Halazia gathered the breaths of all Halazia to create it.”

Left Eye turned Sopro carefully in his hand and explained. They were sailing to the Android Guardian’s bunker to look for the lost Cromer. One of the younger Grimes Siblings, reaching for the stone without hesitation, chimed in: “Then, we should use it to awaken the emotions of the people and Guardians!” Left Eye stopped him and offered a cautious thought.

“Why was something as precious as this thrown away at the Strictland Disposal Site?”

An elder sister of the Grimes Siblings replied to Left Eye:

“It must have been swept up and thrown away along with the countless particles of emotion or our voices. I doubt they knew what it was and just tossed it away.”

Left Eye turned his head to the side and examined the stone which shone the enchanting color of blood.

“Legends are just legends. It might be dangerous. Let’s only use this as a last resort.”

---

Wooyoung, returning quietly to the villa where the members slept, headed to the living room. He passed a table covered with empty bottles and leftovers, went to the antique cabinet, and picked up Sopro.

Wooyoung: “So if I use this... I can sync my and my members’ emotions?”

Sopro’s red light wavered as though in response to Wooyoung’s question. Holding the stone tightly in his fist, Wooyoung brought his hand to his heart and earnestly prayed: “It’s as though they’ve all forgotten what it was like to be happy. Reignite our passion like it was back then, and let us be happy together again. Please.”

Red light spilled from the gaps in his fingers, a ruby aurora dancing throughout the dark room.

# Golden Hour: Part 3

Note: These diary entries were released through the poca album QR codes.

## Mentions of past trauma



I am alive. If anyone were to ask **why**, I honestly could not answer. For as long as I can remember, I have always been alive. I was not brought into existence by my own will. I had lived without thought until one day, I suddenly became aware - aware of the fact that I had been born. But then, where did I come from? Who am I? What am I?

Only I existed in my world, so there was no way for me to know what I was. I have nothing to look at as a comparison. This world consists of only the world itself and me.

“Who am I?”

I shouted out to the world, hoping the world might answer me.

“Who am I?”

The world echoed back the same question. It sounded just like my own voice.

“So, you don’t know who you are either?”

I asked the world again. And once again, it responded the same.

“So you don’t know who you are either?”

I tried asking other questions as well, but each time, the world only echoed my words in a voice much like my own. I would learn nothing from talking to the world. So I stopped asking questions and began to think for myself. What am I? Why was I born? Why do I exist? Why I... I...

At some point, I stopped thinking. Because I couldn’t come to any answers on my own, and the world wouldn’t give me one either. I floated aimlessly in the world, existing without a thought.

That day was no different. It was a day of simply existing - until, all at once, the liquid surrounding me began to heat up intensely. At last, the world was changing. I

floated, still hoping the world might finally give me an answer. Then, without warning, an unending light appeared and I was swept away by it - Once again, not by my own will.

When I finally came to my senses, I had a body. I felt **joy** - It was pure **joy**! For the very first time since birth, I experienced the emotion of **joy**. I felt like I could do anything.



It was a peaceful morning. Technically, it was already past noon - too late to call it "morning" by most standards. But for Wooyoung, who'd only gone to bed at 8 a.m., it was. He was in such a good mood, it almost made him wonder if he'd ever greeted a morning feeling this refreshed.

He got out of bed and headed to the bathroom. As he squeezed toothpaste onto his toothbrush and began brushing his teeth, he hummed a tune absentmindedly. Looking into the mirror, he felt an unexpected sense of warmth.

Wooyoung: "Hi, Jung Wooyoung."

He examined his face from every angle, as if seeing it anew. "You know, I'd say I've got a pretty good-looking face," he muttered softly, then burst into laughter at the pleasant embarrassment. After finishing his shower, he changed into a breezy outfit and stepped outside. Wooyoung had made plans with San to attend Hongjoong's book signing event together.

Just before dawn that day, just as he finally arrived home after managing to catch the first train out, a series of texts flooded in from the other members. The wording varied, but the message was the same: They all agreed with Wooyoung.

Jongho: "I've always related to how you felt. I kept thinking we should come back together as a group, too. Let's try this, *hyung!*"

Yunho: "Honestly, I was a little scared. But after what you said last night, I realized - there's nothing we can't do. I'm in."

Mingi: "I woke up this morning feeling like we could do anything. I guess I was just tired last night and got a little grumpy. Let's give it a shot."

Seonghwa: "Let's see it through this time. As far as we can go."

San: "I'm always on your side, Jung Wooyoung. You know that, right? I'm with you."

Hongjoong: "I guess we were all a little afraid, since we'd gone too far down our own paths. But, somehow, I'm sure now - We can really make it this time. Let's make it happen Wooyoung."

Yeosang: "I think I said too much. I don't even know why I did that. After sleeping on it, I couldn't help but think, was there really anything more important than our dream? Anyway, I want to be part of this, too."

*It was for real!* Wooyoung thought as he received the members' texts. He felt a quiet sense of satisfaction, realizing that the earnest hope he had placed in Sopro, despite his doubts, had really come true. For now, it might just be a spark Sopro ignited, but if they really made it this time, Wooyoung had no doubt the members would be happy too.

The night before, Sopro had emitted a fierce light. It had traveled through Wooyoung's mouth, into his body, then vanished completely. Until now, he had been skeptical about whether Sopro had worked properly. But seeing the results now, he was sure.

After meeting Hongjoong at the signing event with San, the other members were about to join them to discuss their plans for the road ahead, so Wooyoung hurried over. The weather was as bright as his mood. This time, it truly felt like nothing could stop them. Wooyoung was sure of it. Things were already looking up. Some members had become famous in their fields; one could produce music, and another had the means to fund it. It was no longer like those earlier days when all they did - and all they could do - was work hard in vain.

"Oh no!"

A reader receiving an autograph from Hongjoong accidentally spilled their tomato juice. It would've been fine if it had just landed on the book he was signing, but, instead, the juice splashed upward, drenching Hongjoong's head. Wooyoung, who had been about to greet Hongjoong excitedly, ended up being taken aback.

Hongjoong: "Hahaha, it's fine. If anything, I think it snapped me out of my food coma."

Hongjoong smiled warmly, reassuring the reader who had spilled the drink. 'Same as ever. I doubt he even knows how to get mad,' thought Wooyoung. Hongjoong had always been like that. He instinctively put others' feelings before his own. Whenever

Wooyoung had to deal with a difficult passenger, he'd think of Hongjoong - someone born for this kind of work. Had the same thing happened to Wooyoung, though he might be able to **say** "It's fine," he doubted he could have kept the discomfort from his face. Regardless of how gracefully Hongjoong handled it, there was no excuse for the person who spilled the juice not to feel sorry. Wooyoung frowned on Hongjoong's behalf and shot the person a sharp look, waiting for an apology.

"Hahahahahaha! It's like you get to experience Spain's tomato festival right here in Korea! Isn't it great?"

*Huh? What kind of nonsense was that?* That was definitely not the kind of attitude you'd expect from someone who should be apologizing. Wooyoung stated in disbelief. He couldn't hold it in any longer.

Wooyoung: "Hey, jokes are fine and all, but don't you think you should apologize fir-"

Wooyoung was cut off. Because, all at once, the room burst into laughter. People glanced at one another, grinning.

San: "Wooyoung!"

Wooyoung, still not understanding why everyone was laughing, felt relieved to see San. It almost felt like the whole room was in on something he wasn't - a joke he'd been left out of. He turned to San, hoping to let out his frustration, but even San was laughing as he looked at him.

Wooyoung: "Why are you laughing?"

San: "Why? Obviously, because I'm happy. Hahahahaha."

When Wooyoung asked what exactly he was so happy about, San simply replied, "Nothing! Do I need a reason?" **Hahahahahaha**. The sound of laughter filled the bookstore. One of the readers waiting in line for an autograph suddenly flung their drink just like the person who had spilled their juice earlier. Both the one who threw the drink and the one who got hit burst into laughter as they looked at each other. At this, others began to copy them. Both Hongjoong and San laughed as they watched the chaos unfold. Then someone ripped a page out of their book and stuffed it into their mouth, chewing. The room burst into laughter at the sight. Soon, more people started doing the same. They were like children. Hongjoong reached for the book in front of him and tore out a page. But just before he could put it in his mouth, Wooyoung snatched it out of his hand.

Wooyoung: “*Hyung!* What the heck are you doing? Pull yourself together!”

Hongjoong: “Hahahaha. Isn’t this hilarious, Wooyoung? Hahahaha.”

“*Isn’t it hilarious?*” Wooyoung couldn’t wrap his head around what Hongjoong meant. But for some reason, Wooyoung was laughing too. Wooyoung’s reflection in the glass was laughing. **Hahahahahaha.**

What Wooyoung **thought** and what he actually **felt** were completely different. The sense of dissociation made him nauseous, and the nausea made him sick. As dry heaves overtook him, Wooyoung decided to head for the bathroom and turned away. Just then, as the sixth wave of nausea hit him, a bright, ruby-red light suddenly poured from his mouth. Unsure of what he had just thrown up, Wooyoung stood frozen, staring at the ruby red light floating in the air before him. It was Sopro. It hovered before Wooyoung for a short moment before whizzing around him a couple of times as if to say, “it’s nice to meet you,” and then flew straight into San’s open, laughing mouth. The people around them watching began to laugh even louder at the sight. **Hahahahahaha.** The laughter was unending. Wooyoung, wanting to check if he was still laughing himself, touched his face with his hands. It was devoid of laughter. Yet he did not know if this was a good thing or not. In the middle of the laughing crowd, Wooyoung stood alone with a grave look on his face.



The group had made plans to meet Seonghwa at the nearby fire department after the book signing. But Hongjoong and San were laughing so hard they could barely walk, and it took them an entire hour to make it a mere 600 meters. They laughed at the bright sunlight, at the birds chirping, and at the deep green color of the leaves. Had it just been Hongjoong and San laughing, things might not have been so difficult, but each and every person they passed erupted into laughter, as well. People out walking would break into grins at the sight of each other. They high-fived and laughed together like old friends with everyone they met. Struggling to keep things under control, Wooyoung dragged Hongjoong and San along until they finally reached the fire department where Seonghwa was on duty... yet Seonghwa was nowhere to be found.

Seonghwa’s boss, the fire chief, whose daughter happened to be a big fan of Mingi, greeted them instead. Unsurprisingly, the chief was also laughing, and his unusual laugh cracked Hongjoong and San up to the point that it literally had them on the floor. Wooyoung was exhausted and, now resigned to the fact that Hongjoong and San were still laughing, turned to the chuckling fire chief. He asked about the

whereabouts of Seonghwa. Wooyoung was told that a major fire had broken out at the printing factory, and Seonghwa had been dispatched there. When asked if they would wait for Seonghwa at the fire department, Wooyoung responded by asking if the printing factory was far away. Hearing that it was only a 15 minute walk, Wooyoung decided to head there. It seemed that the fire chief - and all the other firefighters at the station - were too busy laughing. At that moment, Wooyoung wanted nothing more than to find someone who felt the same as he did. He had a faint hope that Seonghwa of all people wouldn't let himself get caught up in this strange phenomenon. After all, he had never seen Seonghwa laugh hysterically before.

Seonghwa: "Gyahahahaha! The fire's being extinguished. It's going OUT! Hahahaha."

Wooyoung's hope vanished along with the rapidly fading fire. While it was great that they had the fire under control, the sight of firefighters laughing uncontrollably at the charred remains of the building, its framework exposed, was unsettling. Even the person who seemed to be the owner of the printing factory stood behind the firefighters, laughing, as well. Wooyoung's head throbbed. As much as he tried, he couldn't think of a way out of this odd situation. He was starting to feel like **he** was the weird one for acting so serious despite everyone else's joy and laughter. Frustrated, Wooyoung shoved his hands in his pockets and stepped back. He was beginning to feel like he would rather give up and just be an onlooker than try to be a hero. He wanted to run away, but knew that he couldn't. He couldn't ignore the fact that everything happening was somehow linked to him. Sopro... He should have never placed his hopes on that damn Sopro.

Just then, something caught in his hand. Wooyoung pulled it from his pocket. When he unfolded it, he realized it was a page from the book Hongjoong had torn earlier. In other words, it was a page from their time in World Z containing Z's brainwashing speech made to control people's emotions. As he read it, Wooyoung felt a strange sense of irony. How odd, he thought, to find himself relating - even just a little - to the words of Z.

Wooyoung: "A small error is a crack, and cracks lead to pain. Pain. Pain is an unnecessary emotion and a negative element in life. We want to protect you all."

In the face of the paradoxical situation he was currently trapped in, Wooyoung was stunned. Without thinking, he began to read Z's words out loud. That was when, though it lasted only for a brief moment, Hongjoong, San, and Seonghwa stopped laughing. The laughter quickly resumed, but Wooyoung was sure that it marked a meaningful shift. Ever since the laughter began in the bookstore, it hadn't stopped. Not at the fire department, not even after arriving at the printing factory. Not until

now. Wanting to confirm whether it had all just been in his head, Wooyoung continued reading Z's speech.

Wooyoung: "A world without cracks is always beautiful. You, living your life in your position, are the world itself."

It wasn't just his imagination. As Wooyoung read Z's speech aloud, the three stopped laughing and clutched their heads, as if struck by a wave of pain. San even began to gag. It was working!

Wooyoung: "Don't doubt yourselves. You're always right."

He recited the words "Don't doubt yourselves" over and over, and Hongjoong, San and Seonghwa began to show signs of confusion. San kept gagging until Sopro was finally ejected from his body. At the same time, Hongjoong and Seonghwa screamed in agony from the intense headaches. Sopro, still floating in the air, flew rapidly around them as if it were scanning everything around it. Like a bee, it buzzed past the burnt factory, the bright-red fire truck, the blue sky, and the lush trees.

HWUP! Taking a deep breath, Hongjoong, San and Seonghwa looked around like they had just woken up from a deep sleep. They were no longer smiling. Finally!

"Wooyoung!"

As the three spotted Wooyoung and headed toward him, Wooyoung suddenly jumped up and yelled out in alarm.

Wooyoung: "Don't laugh! I swear if any of you laugh one more time-!"

Wooyoung spoke with a stern look on his face. It was the look of a policeman shouting, "Put down your weapons and step back. If you don't, I'll shoot!" Pfft. The absurdity of it made the three of them laugh, despite themselves. Ahhh... Thinking he had failed, Wooyoung slumped down in despair.

Seonghwa: "It's not what you think. It's just... The way you said 'don't laugh!' with such a serious look on your face..."

San: "Seriously. How much trouble did we put you through with our laughing?"

Only then did Wooyoung finally look up and examine the members' faces. While they were smiling, they weren't laughing hysterically like they had been before. Wooyoung studied the crumpled paper in his hand.

Wooyoung: "Does this mean that Z saved us?"

Hongjoong: "When you were reading that, flashes of the events we experienced in World Z began appearing in my head. It was as if my mind were a giant popcorn machine, and our memories were the popcorn bursting inside."

Seonghwa: "It's not so much that Z saved us, but that Z's speech brought back memories of our time there. It caused this burning pain in my head, but then, all of a sudden, my mind cleared."

While there was no way to know for certain, they were sure Seonghwa's theory was likely to be right. All the people around them, everyone except the members, were still laughing uncontrollably. Only the members who knew of World Z could recall those memories. The others didn't even know what World Z was. So how were they supposed to help them...

San: "By the way, what caused all this in the first place?"

Just as Wooyoung was hesitating, trying to find the right words to San's question, Sopro, which had been buzzing around like a bee, chose its next target. While the members kept their eyes fixed on Wooyoung as he nervously bit his lip, Sopro slipped unnoticed into the mouth of the printing factory owner. The man, who had been laughing hysterically as he watched his life's work go up in flames, swallowed Sopro and instantly stopped laughing.



The world I had existed in up until then was small. And for the longest time, that world was my only conversation partner, my entire universe... everything that existed apart from me. Yet now that I've stepped out of that tiny universe, it means nothing more to me than 'the place where I used to be.' Just like a bird turns its back on the hard shell it once called home after emerging into the greater world, so do I.

They say that when a baby bird does not know how to break out of its shell, the mother bird will gently make the first crack with her beak. Maybe the one who made the first crack in my world lent me a bit of their strength after seeing how long I had remained trapped there. Just like a mother bird. They showed me the real world. And what a great, wide world it is.

I was so happy. It felt like my chest might burst, and laughter just spilled out of me. People called this feeling - this sense of saying yes to everything - **joy**. Some called it

**delight**, or **amusement**, or **excitement**. Joy, joy, joy. The word sounded so pretty, I couldn't help but say it over and over.

Everything felt new - the water splashing into the air, the sunlight sparkling all around, even the simple act of breathing in and out. The crinkle of smiles at the corners of people's eyes, the trees swaying as if waving back. It was all so strange, so beautiful... so exciting, so delightful, so funny, so full of joy. How had I gone my whole life without noticing any of it?

Had I been **too** excited? My mother bird spat me out so quickly. But I wanted to feel this emotion just a little longer! As I was savoring the feeling of joy through the second person's body, I was suddenly hit by something complex and disorientating. It was too tangled to call joy. It was as though a rainbow of colors were being painted atop of me. It was odd. And so, this time, I chose to leave the host of my own accord. I looked at the world as myself. Though it was just as beautiful as before, I did not feel the intense joy that I had felt when I had a body. I could not touch anything, but I wanted to feel more. To do that, I needed a body.

It was then that I noticed him, a person who looked just like an empty shell. He wasn't far from the first two hosts I had entered. The man was sitting on the ground, laughing at the sight of a burnt building. And so, I dove toward him. Splash. The sensation was akin to diving into a deep, dark sea. I lost all sense of direction, unsure of which way was up or down. I wanted to escape, and so I kept swimming. After a while, I began to wonder whether I was swimming toward something or simply sinking.



Wooyoung's ears turned red. He had been so sure in his decision to use Sopro at the time, but now, trying to explain it under the bright midday sun, he couldn't help feeling embarrassed. That said, it wasn't something he could hide. All the strange events that happened so far were clearly connected to Sopro. Recounting the events of last night back to the members, he was reminded of Yeosang's words: "Grow up. How long do you plan on acting so recklessly?" Part of him felt so wronged. *Is it really so reckless to still be chasing a dream? Is it such a childish thing to do?* Embarrassment and frustration fought inside him, and, for a moment, he felt as if he might cry. But he didn't. His ears just burned a deeper shade of red instead.

San: "So you think it synchronized our emotions? That sounds half-right... but also half-wrong."

Hongjoong: "Sopro didn't come inside me, so I don't really know much about that. What I felt was more like... this overwhelming surge of happiness and joy."

Seonghwa: "I guess you could say it was kind of like being a little drunk. Sort of like when you're already in a good mood and the alcohol just makes you even more giddy."

Hongjoong: "Yeah, exactly. But unlike alcohol, it didn't mess with my memory or anything. It was just the emotion, vivid and clear, like it was all I could *feel*."

Wooyoung had expected the members to scold, if not blame, him for what had happened, but, to his surprise, they focused only on analyzing the situation with Sopro instead. This made Wooyoung **more** nervous, if anything - If he was going to be slapped and told off for this, he wanted to get it over with quickly.

Wooyoung: "Sorry. It's my fault you all got dragged into this mess."

Seeing how visibly deflated Wooyoung looked, the members began confessing their own wrongdoings one by one, looking as though they had no other choice.

Hongjoong: "You know, three years ago, when we were all starting to get busy on our own and drift apart, I thought about using Sopro myself. I even went to see Yeosang about it, but ended up turning back empty-handed."

San: "Back when I first started setting up my food truck, I needed money, so I went to ask Yeosang for help. That day, I saw Sopro at his house and also thought for a second that maybe I should use it to bring us back together. But honestly, I was too afraid to even touch Sopro, so I never did."

Seonghwa: "I think it was some time around the start of this year? I was drinking with Yeosang, and he pulled out Sopro. He said he still feels guilty whenever he thinks about how his father's opposition split us apart. Now that he's strong enough to protect us, he wondered if we could come together through Sopro - at least in spirit."

Wooyoung had been sure that Yeosang thought that any dream of being together was futile. He had no clue that they had really been thinking the same thing until recently. But looking back on it, he remembered how Yeosang had been the one to sacrifice himself and break the Cromer for the sake of the members. He had always valued and believed in their dream.

Seonghwa: "Using the buzz as an excuse, we were actually planning to activate Sopro. I also really missed our time together a lot. But then, suddenly, Yeosang said something."

*"Hey hyung... What if what the guys are doing right now becomes their dream?"*

Seonghwa recalled how Yeosang's words snapped him back to his sense. Lost in the past, he had momentarily forgotten about his dream of becoming a firefighter. Seonghwa liked his job as a firefighter. While it may not have been his original dream, that didn't mean it lacked any meaning to him.

*"What if - and these are all just 'what-ifs.' What if the guys have found new dreams? If we were to use Sopro, and go back to how things were in the past, wouldn't that mean I'd be robbing the members of their dreams again?"*

Seonghwa: "Your first love isn't your only love. And that's why, in the end, we put Sopro back in its place."

Though the red hue in his ears had faded, Wooyoung felt even more embarrassed than before. He realized that Yeosang was definitely so much more mature than himself. Even the fact that he had felt resentful for a brief moment made him feel ashamed now.

Wooyoung: "I had no idea. That Yeosang felt the same way I did, and that, like an adult, he chose to maturely accept things after thinking everything over."

As Wooyoung hung his head, San put an arm around one of his shoulders. Seonghwa also stepped closer and placed an arm around his other shoulder. Hongjoong took a step forward and spoke:

Hongjoong: "We're not saying this to make you feel bad. What I wanted to say is that we all wanted to use Sopro, too. There's no need to blame yourself."

Hongjoong gently tousled Wooyoung's hair. How could Wooyoung not love these kind-hearted, understanding friends of his? It made him realize once again that, while he did want to make music and perform and dance on stage, the most important part of that dream was being together with the other members that he loved so dearly. Looking at the three pairs of feet gathered around him in a circle, Wooyoung clenched his fists. This was no time to wallow in self-pity. He was the one who awakened Sopro, and it was up to him to find a way out of this.

Wooyoung: "Left Eye said that according to legend, Sopro was made by collecting the breath of Halazia. It probably reacted to our memories of World Z since it's from there."

The members nodded in agreement with Wooyoung's theory. It was true that the memories of World Z had effectively woken San, Hongjoong and Seonghwa up. But it was unclear whether Sopro had reacted because of that.

Hongjoong: "If it was Sopro that responded to those memories, shouldn't that mean that everyone, not just us, should have woken up as well?"

San: "Wait, everyone stopped laughing."

At San's words, the four of them turned and looked around. The people who had been laughing ceaselessly until just a moment before had stopped. Yet the members weren't sure if it was because the emotional resonance ended when San spat Sopro out, or because Sopro had disappeared entirely. All while they were still trying to make sense of what had happened, a fire hose suddenly fell to the ground with a thud. The firefighter, who was wrapping up, let go of the fire hose and slumped to the floor with a heavy sigh. Waaaah. He groaned, and soon after, he burst into tears. His crying grew louder and louder until it was a sorrowful, heavy sob. It sounded both deeply painful and sad. Waaaaahhhh Waaahhhh.

The sound of crying erupted all around them like a water dam breaking into a flood. The whole city-its shops, apartments, house-lined streets, and public squares - filled with sadness. The members, who had been making their way out of the alley and looking around the main street, seemed momentarily overwhelmed by the grief and paused for a moment, holding their breath.

Wooyoung: "I don't see the printing factory owner!"

Wooyoung, still standing before the burnt building, called out to the others. Only then did it hit them that Sopro, after disappearing, must have gone into the printing factory owner's body. The source of the sadness had to be the printing factory owner. It was the sadness of the printing factory owner, whose lifelong savings and hard work had gone into creating that shop, only to have it consumed by flames in an instant.

Wooyoung: "We need to find him. Sopro's inside of him now."

The members began running around in search of him, sure that, immobilized by sadness, he couldn't have gone far.

Laughter had disappeared from the streets that, just moments ago, had been filled with people doubling over in joy. Now, some slumped to the ground, pounding it as they sobbed, while others lay motionless, crying quietly. A few stood still, their faces buried in their hands, sobbing quietly. It had been hard enough dealing with the hysterical laughter, but this, now - the way people wordlessly cried like wild animals - was much worse. Walking down a street filled with nothing but wails felt like walking through hell. It was as if the whole city was one big funeral. The members waded through that hell, looking for the factory owner with no clue as to where he might be as he drowned in despair.

San stretched out his arm and pointed. There, on the other side of a glass window, stood Yeosang, quietly weeping.

San: "Look. Over there. Isn't that Yeosang?"

Seonghwa: "He must have been on his way to Jongho's studio."

From the look of it, he was heading for Jongho's recording studio when he was hit with the resonating sadness. Yeosang forgot where he was heading and stood frozen in place and lost in despair. The image of Yeosang standing there on the other side of that glass window reminded them of how he had looked trapped by the Guardians and desolate of hope. It seemed as though while Yeosang's body was there in World A, his mind was still stuck in that moment, in that place in World Z. Tears flowed from his empty eyes.

Wooyoung: "Yeo...Sang."

At the sound of his name being called, Yeosang lifelessly turned to look at Wooyoung standing outside the window. Seeing the deep, dark despair clouding Yeosang's eyes, Wooyoung felt his breath catch in his throat.

Back then, after the others had finally made their way back to World Z and saved Yeosang, it was as though he'd lost his voice - as though he were someone who had lost all feeling, devoid of emotion and showing no reaction even to the members' words. It wasn't until much later that Yeosang began to open up about that time.

*"I thought there was no way out. At first, I tried to find ways to survive, to escape, but before long... I realized there was no way. I don't know if the Guardians stole my emotions from me or..."*

Yeosang swallowed his words and left the thought unfinished, but the members knew what he meant to say. Though they wanted to fully understand what Yeosang had gone through during his time trapped alone there, they also knew that there are times when effort alone is not enough. The most they could do for him was to hold his frozen hands and hope that the warmth might reach his heart. No words felt right - no words were enough. As if he understood everything without needing it to be said, Yeosang simply smiled, bright and gentle, and continued:

*"Still, I like who I am more now, after having gone through all of that. I used to think that there was no way out, but it turns out that was just something I decided when I was lost in despair. There's a huge difference between living with that understanding and living without it, don't you think?"*

After going through all of that, Yeosang would sometimes joke that he was, by far, now the most mature of them all - If anything, they should all be calling him hyung. And so, the members believed that Yeosang had overcome his pain and that they understood, at least to some extent, the pain that he had endured.

But that was all only an illusion. In Yeosang's dark, tear-filled eyes, the wounds left by despair and fear were still there, raw and unhealed. Someone once said that even a speck of one's pain feels heavier than the vast pain of others - that it's the same for everyone. And now, Wooyoung felt like he finally understood what that meant. The pain he had thought was unbearably heavy was, in truth, so small compared to what Yeosang had endured - or was perhaps still enduring.

Pushing aside the thought that they needed to look for the factory owner, Wooyoung rushed to pull open the glass door. He couldn't bear to see Yeosang trapped anywhere any longer. Wooyoung held Yeosang's hand. It was cold, just as it had been that time. He prayed that the warmth of his hand might reach him. 'I finally understand your dream now, Yeosang. You wanted to be free. From the cage your father put you in, from the Guardians' glass room... And you are, Yeosang. You made it. You built a world of your own, and you found the strength to now protect both yourself and everything you hold dear. You're amazing, you know that? Truly incredible.' Wooyoung spoke with his heart as he clutched Yeosang's hand and

looked into his dark eyes, praying that his feelings would somehow reach him. And at that moment, he saw it - a small flame flicker to life in Yeosang's once lightless eyes.

Hongjoong: "Let's head to Jongho's recording studio first."

While his face remained sad, the tears that had flowed down Yeosang's face had stopped. Wooyoung, pulling Yeosang along by the hand, followed Hongjoong, Seonghwa and San into Jongho's studio.

Jongho: "Oh, you guys made it."

They opened the door to Jongho's studio, worried that they would find him crying as well, but to their surprise, he greeted them with a calm expression, perfectly fine. Was his mindset so strong that not even Sopro could affect him? Despite his cute appearance, Jongho could be almost frighteningly incredible.

Jongho: "I just got lucky. I was listening to ATEEZ's music when it all happened."

Late last night, after texting Wooyoung that he had agreed with him, Jongho went straight to the recording studio. The members had promised to meet there and discuss what kind of music they would create together from now on, and he didn't want to wait a second longer. At first, Jongho had also been under Sopro's influence, and, laughing, excitedly played ATEEZ's music from a performance of theirs in World Z. Upon hearing the song, his head was struck by an immense pain, and he came to his senses immediately. The youngest's luck was truly amazing.

Jongho: "Yeosang hasn't woken up yet, right? Hold on..."

Hearing from the other members what happened, and seeing Yeosang drowning in sorrow, he decided to use the same method that had worked for him. Like a doctor diagnosing and treating a sick patient, Jongho calmly played ATEEZ's music for Yeosang. For a moment, Yeosang held his head in pain, just like the other members had, before life returned to his eyes as he regained consciousness. Wooyoung pulled Yeosang in for a tight hug, sorry that he had misunderstood and resented him for so long. Though a bit awkward, but not unpleasant for him, Yeosang gently patted Wooyoung's back a few times, before quietly asking:

Yeosang: "So... what exactly is going on?"

*Haaah...* Wooyoung let out a long sigh. Seonghwa, Hongjoong, and San looked at Wooyoung and quietly laughed.

Wooyoung: "Just how many times am I going to have to atone for my mistakes today? Can we maybe find Mingi and Yunho first before I explain myself again?"

Yeosang, who was staring at Wooyoung with a straight face, sighed and responded:

Yeosang: "Jung Wooyoung, I knew this would happen. You touched Sopro, didn't you?"

*'Damn you, Kang Yeosang...'* Wooyoung thought.

*"Taking coffee orders. Anyone who doesn't respond in 5 minutes is getting an Iced Coffee."*

*"lollll Song Mingi look behind you"*

*"Met up with Yunho at the café. We'll head over together."*

Those were the last messages Yunho and Mingi left in their group chat. It was clear that the two were together and at a café somewhere nearby. Jongho copied ATEEZ's music onto his phone so that it would be ready to play to the crying members once they found them. But first, the group put their heads together and tried to sort out what they knew about Sopro.

San: "At first, it was like Wooyoung said - I felt like my emotions were resonating with something. But it was different after Sopro went inside me."

San, after hearing Wooyoung recall his experience absorbing Sopro, explained that his encounter was a little different. After Wooyoung first held Sopro in his hand and prayed that the members would all feel the same emotions as he did, he felt a sense of relief. It was the kind of relief you feel after sharing your true hopes and desires. It felt so natural that Wooyoung was not aware at all that Sopro had gone inside of him - The only unusual thing he noticed was the bright, ruby red light. Then, when the members texted him saying they wanted to try out being a group again, all he felt

was pure joy and elation. And just as he had hoped, the other members had felt the same way, like they could do anything, fueled by an overwhelming sense of excitement and joy. But it was different when Sopro moved to San.

San: "How should I put this... It didn't feel like all my emotions were being amplified, but that *one, specific* emotion within me was heightened more than anything else. Like someone was forcing me to throw away every emotion *except* for joy.

It was as if the only emotion that ever existed was "joy", as if every other emotion had never existed at all. San recalled how he felt as though he could only feel happiness, and how, at the time, it felt natural. But, as soon as Sopro left his body, the other emotions that had been suppressed hit him like a wave, and he became aware that **something** had been manipulating him.

Yeosang: "So what Left Eye told us about Sopro was wrong?"

Jongho: "Maybe it's not the emotions of the person using Sopro that are synchronized with others, but the emotions that Sopro chooses to feel instead."

Seonghwa: "But that wasn't what Wooyoung experienced. When it was inside Wooyoung, we were sharing his feelings."

While Sopro went inside both of them, what Wooyoung and San had experienced was clearly different. What caused that difference? The members were deep in thought.

Wooyoung: "It was such a chaotic moment, and everything happened so quickly, so I'm not sure but..."

Wooyoung hesitated, and the others waited in anticipation of what he would say next.

Wooyoung: "When Sopro left San, it looked a little bigger. At least compared to when it left me."

Wooyoung spoke with uncertainty, unsure and suggesting that he might have been mistaken. Meanwhile, Hongjoong, who had been leaning against the wall listening to the other members talk about their experience, seemed to gain some certainty after hearing Wooyoung's words of observation.

Hongjoong: "Could it be that Sopro is getting stronger? The only difference between Wooyoung and San's experience was the order - Wooyoung was first, and San was second."

The other members looked at Hongjoong with expressions that clearly said they didn't understand what he meant.

Hongjoong, pushing himself off the wall and taking a step closer to the members, continued:

Hongjoong: "Try to remember what Left Eye said. According to the legends of World Z, Sopro is a magical spirit (靈) born out of the breath of Halazia. It's not a magic stone, battery, or anything like that... It's a *spirit* (靈). Do you understand what this means?"

It's not an object, but a spirit. What does that even mean? The members pondered the meaning of Hongjoong's words. After a moment, they all answered in unison: "It has a will of its own?!"

Yeosang: "It seems like the most plausible theory for now. If Sopro is a spirit with a will, then everything that happened makes sense."

Wooyoung: "When the spirit first awoke, it was weak."

San: "And by the time it moved to me, it was a little stronger."

Jongho: "What about when it switched from joy to sadness?"

That's probably because Sopro is now residing inside the printing factory owner's body. Having just lost his life's fortune in a fire, the man was probably overwhelmingly sad. Why was Sopro resonating with that emotion, instead of forcing him to feel joy like it had done to San earlier?

Seonghwa: "Could it be learning different emotions?"

The other members' eyes widened at Seonghwa's words.

If, as Seonghwa said, Sopro is experiencing and learning emotions, that would explain their current situation.

Hongjoong: “To sum everything up, Sopro is a spirit (靈) with will, and it needs a vessel to contain it, like a body. And each time it moves bodies, it gets stronger.”

Yeosang: “While doing so, it learns the main emotion each vessel is feeling in that moment. It can also force or impose any emotions it wants to feel onto its shell.”

Wooyoung: “In other words, Sopro is growing.”

At Wooyoung’s words, everyone looked at each other with their mouths agape. In such a short period of time, it had already made its way through three bodies, and its power had grown to the point that it could force people around it to instantly synchronize with a particular emotion. Like Wooyoung said, Sopro was growing - and it was growing fast.

Jongho: “Something’s happening.”

They all turned their heads toward Jongho. Without any further explanation, he held out his phone. The screen was open to Jongho’s social media feed, and they could see people’s posts were disappearing in real time. Jongho looked up Mingi’s account. It read “no Posts.” Mingi, an influencer with over 10 million followers, now had an empty account. They kept refreshing the page in disbelief ... then Mingi’s account disappeared.

San: “We need to find Mingi and Yunho!”

## **Golden Hour: Part 3 ‘In Your Fantasy’ Edition**

They found Yunho and Mingi in a nearby café. Thanks to the music Jongho had prepared beforehand, they were able to wake them up without much trouble. This once again confirmed that it was the members, not Sopro, who were reacting to memories of World Z. These “shared memories” are what freed the members from Sopro’s control. It would seem that the memories of people close to them awake emotions buried in their unconscious that fragmented Sopro’s control and allowed them to break free.

As soon as the members left the recording studio, they understood why Mingi had hidden his social media posts. The people who had been sad, crying, and drained by despair were now standing awkwardly, hugging their arms as if insecure in themselves. They were flushed from head to toe like Red Humans from World Z, and

they scurried out of sight like stray cats. They hid behind cars, trees, and buildings, and only stepped out into the open after carefully peering outside. They walked fast, and when they ran into another person, they would let out a small scream and then hide again. It must have been because of this “embarrassment” that people began deleting their social media posts. Photos of themselves at the gym, photos proudly taken after passing an exam, selfies photoshopped to be prettier than real-life, posts sharing snapshots of delicious food... The people were embarrassed by these expressions of themselves and either hid or deleted their posts, or deactivated their accounts altogether.

The café Yunho and Mingi were wasn't far from Jongho's recording studio, but it had been surprisingly hard for the other members to find them. At each café the members visited, people were hiding. And so, like playing a game of hide-and-seek, they had to find the people hiding in the café and check them one by one. They found Mingi first, stomping his feet and hiding behind a sign, embarrassed at all his pictures visible around town. Then they found Yunho hiding under a café table.

Hongjoong: “It looks like it learned a new emotion... which means it must have also moved to a new person.”

Once again, Wooyoung had to confess that he had awoken Sopro, and Mingi and Yunho, now aware of the situation after hearing the whole story, turned serious. They had to find Sopro quickly before things got out of hand.

Yunho: “It feels like something just changed slightly. Do you think it could have moved from ‘embarrassment’ and onto someone else?”

Come to think of it, the air inside the café *had* changed. Up until the moment they found Yunho and Mingi, the people's embarrassment had a spoonful of ‘curiosity’ mixed in it, as well. Now, it had turned into something different than the kind of shy embarrassment you get when you accidentally make eye contact with your crush. The people's faces had turned red, and their breathing had grown heavier. They bit their lips and clenched their fists, looking like they were desperately holding back an urge to run away. It was an emotion that looked like ‘embarrassment’ but with an undertone of restraint. What was it called again... Oh! That's right!

Wooyoung: “Shame.”

That was it. The people were now ashamed.



*I feel like I'm dying. I'm so sad. Depressed. Why is this only happening to me? What the hell did I do wrong? It's so painful. It's too hard. I'm lonely. How am I supposed to keep on living like this from now on?*

I sank into despair and endlessly poured out painful thoughts. "Sadness." The feeling of it was so overwhelming that I was at a loss. It was the first time I had experienced sadness. Back when I was alone in that world for so long... had I been sad then, too? Had I been lonely, depressed, and distressed? Not once had I thought I was sad back then. Because I had never learned how to feel sad in the first place. But now I feel sad when I think of myself back then.

Upon entering the body I chose, I fell into a deep sea. I wanted to escape this body as fast as I could, but I couldn't find the way out no matter how much I swam. I was suffocating and in pain. I didn't know what 'death' meant for me, but I felt like I truly was going to die. When I struggled to breathe, my body began to shed tears. It wailed as it cried. Then, strangely, the water in the sea where I was drowning began to decrease. Little by little, slowly. The sea of sadness receded like the tide. As the water level went down, I began to see the surface beyond the sea. Light poured in. Maybe to cry is to let the sadness out, like opening a faucet. I thought that if I stayed there any longer, I would surely drown, so I quickly swam out toward the light.

I escaped that body and looked around. I could see a river - It was the Han River. Its water glistened in the scattered sunlight. The river looked like a huge, long dragon. I flew low and lightly touched the dragon's scales. The scales created small ripples, which disappeared and then reappeared. Then, from the other side of the river, I heard a woman laughing. It was a different kind of sound from excited, joyful laughter. I grew curious. I moved in the direction of the woman's laugh.

The woman was walking with a man along the river. The two walked side by side, bumping shoulders, and as they waved their arms back and forth, their fingertips brushed naturally. "The weather is so nice." "Ah, there are so many bugs here. I think one just got in my eye." They chattered about nothing in particular and laughed nonstop. *Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum.* Even from far away, I could hear the man's heartbeat. I was sure the woman heard it, too, but she only smiled softly, pretending she didn't know a thing. At the end of her smile, her cheeks were red. I was curious about the emotion behind that smile. I wanted to feel that emotion that was so clearly different from the joy I had felt when I first entered my mother bird. I dove into the woman's body.

I was dropped onto a cushion of cute, puffy clouds. I rolled around in the soft fluffiness. This emotion seemed to consist of subtle clusters of feelings, rather than

an endless expanse. When I tried jumping on the clouds, they propelled me upward with a bounce, and I was able to move higher and higher. At some point, I stopped and took a bite of another cloud fluttering by. It was sweet. I grew tipsy. A soft pink color began spreading throughout my deep red body. Was what I just ate poisonous? While I was a little worried, the thought didn't bother me too much. I was just drunk. Who cares if it was poison? Right now, my heart is fluttering, and I feel good.

*The man took the woman's hand, and the woman carefully curled her fingers around his. Then the whole world shook, and the clouds shot me up even higher. Everything moved dizzily fast. He'll smell my sweat if he gets this close. I'm sweating so much... is my makeup okay? It didn't melt off, did it? There's a pimple on my right cheek. What if he sees it? I should have put on perfume. I ate so much at lunch... My stomach won't show, right? He said earlier that he likes intelligent and respectable girls. I need to make sure I come off like that. I should clean up my social media accounts tonight. Oh, god, my hands are sweating. What should I do? I hope he doesn't think I'm gross. Should I pull away for a second and try to wipe my hands? But then, how do I take his hand again? Wouldn't he take it as rejection?*

In a short moment, countless worries passed through the woman's mind. But when the man brushed a stray lock of hair out of the woman's face, she turned red again, and all her thoughts stopped. It felt like being propelled back and forth uncontrollably on a rollercoaster. While the woman liked the man, she was also overcome by the desire to run away and hide. Yet, at the same time, she didn't want to leave him either, and was worried about how she looked to him right now. She felt good, but also a little nauseous as if she were motion-sick, or perhaps hungover. Then, a new group of people appeared in front of the couple.

"Look who it is! Who's that next to you? Your boyfriend?"

The group approached them cautiously. It seemed that they knew the woman. The woman's body grew stiff at their greeting, and when asked if the man holding her hand was her boyfriend, she shook off his hand entirely. As if they were strangers. The people in the group covered their faces with their hands as if they were embarrassed, but continued to talk, glancing at the woman through their fingers.

"I couldn't tell it was you at first."

"Don't you think those clothes are a little too tight?"

"I mean, I know you lost 20kg, but really."

“What’s with your makeup?”

They looked at the woman and spoke sheepishly as if they were embarrassed **by** her. At that moment, I fell from the clouds. The clouds disappeared, and the space around me slowly darkened. I landed with a thump in the center of a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people. Everyone was wearing masks that mimicked laughter. In unison, the crowd turned to me and pointed their fingers. *Click*. A spotlight fell on me. I was in the light, and the crowd was outside of it. I was alone, and they were the majority. I wanted to get out of the light and hide among them, but they blocked my every escape.

*I’m so embarrassed. What the hell do they even think of me? Why did I have to run into them here? The woman thought, and I thought the same. I want to run away. I want to disappear. The woman continued to think: I want to run away. How embarrassing. I feel sick. I’m sure he’s disgusted by me now, too. The woman and I thought at the same time: I want to disappear. I want to disappear.*

The woman ran away. She ran, leaving the man and the group. I also ran away from the spotlight that followed me. I squeezed into the group, in between the masked people, and ran recklessly. It didn’t matter where I was headed. My only goal was to get out of there. The woman and I ran wild. So that the spotlights and masked crowd couldn’t catch us again. It was then, *Thwack!* I hit something and fell.

Yunho: “I found it.”

A man pointed a gun at the woman. No, on closer inspection, it wasn’t a gun. It was something that looked like a gun. It shot a light at the woman and beeped - screamed - as if to make an announcement.

Mingi: “It really worked. The spirit scanner.”

Yeosang: “To think someone studying archaeology would have such a pseudo-scientific thing. I don’t believe it.”

Yunho: “Thanks for the input, but don’t you think we should focus on catching it right now?”

Just as the man carrying the so-called “spirit scanner” finished speaking, the remaining seven men rushed to me and the woman. As I struggled away from them, I looked behind me. I was afraid that the masked people I had just been with might still come after us.

Seonghwa: "Oh, sorry. Sorry about this."

San: "We're not trying to harm you. We're just looking for something that we think might be with you right now."

Yeosang: "Please stay still. We don't want to hurt you."

Hongjoong: "This must all be so shocking. We're really sorry. Please cooperate for just a moment."

Wooyoung: "I'm sorry. I think you might have something I lost."

A tall man pulled a phone out of the bag that the woman dropped. The man, who unlocked the phone with the woman's finger, began searching through her photo album. What were they doing? I used the woman to ask sharply.

**"Just what do you think you're doing right now?"**

Yunho: "We're trying to help you. We're looking for a way to force out Sopro, that thing that snuck inside you and is messing with your emotions."

Sopro? Does he mean me? Is my name Sopro? How did this man know that I'm inside her? No, wait. First of all, I never messed with this woman's emotions. I was just curious. I just wanted to know how she felt. So why is this man misunderstanding me? I used the woman again to speak.

**"No, you've got it all wrong. No one's messing with my emotions."**

San: "You only think that way because Sopro's inside you. Sopro has the power to control people's emotions as it pleases."

Hongjoong: "Just a moment ago, you felt ashamed, right? I don't know for sure if that's what Sopro felt, or if those emotions were purely yours... But, because you have Sopro in you, those feelings are infecting everyone around us. Look."

The man stepped away so that he could see the people around the Han River. People stood, their faces red and on the verge of tears, shaking as they held back their shame. Was this because of me? I had only intended to go into the woman's body and feel her emotions, but was it because of me that everyone else was also feeling the same thing?

Mingi: "Should we try this?"

The man who had been looking through pictures on the woman's cell phone held it up. Everyone nodded in agreement as if to say yes. Then, the man held out the cell phone in front of the woman's face. A video played on the screen.

Yeosang: "Hey, hey. The sound. Turn on the sound."

At that, the man holding the cell phone tapped the screen a few times before holding it out again. This time, a sound played along with the video.

**"Give me your hand! Hand!"**

The woman in the video spoke in a bright voice. A puppy approached happily and held out its paw to the woman. The woman burst into laughter.

**"Good boy! You're such a good boy, aren't you?"**

The woman held out her hand, and the puppy nuzzled its face against her. The woman laughed and petted the dog, and the dog happily enjoyed the affection.

My head felt as though it might crack. The woman crouched down and rubbed her temples. As she did so, the men who had been holding her let go.

**"Come! Follow me."**

The woman in the video ran backwards, filming the dog. Then the dog ran towards the woman. The woman here outside the video began to heave.

A vortex sped toward me. If I got caught in that vortex, I would be forced outside again. I had this feeling that I shouldn't go outside, not now. As I ran away from the vortex, the dog from the video began running toward me from the opposite side. The woman must be recalling memories of her dog. But, unlike the bright image in the video, the dog snarled at me, showing its fangs. He barked and growled loudly, as if trying to protect the woman and telling me to get out - now! He was telling me that if I ignored his warning, he would attack. I backed up. At that moment, I was swept away by the vortex from behind.

Hongjoong: "It's out!"

Wooyoung: "Look! It's definitely bigger than before."

Seonghwa: "Wooyoung, quick!"

The woman threw me up. I was overwhelmed by the weight of the gaze of the eight men surrounding me. It was more oppressive than the gaze of the masks I felt inside the woman. The huge men were looking down at me as I lay on the floor. I felt both shame and fear. I need to get out of here, right now. It was then - Someone stepped on me.

Wooyoung: "I... I got it!"

It hurt. I wanted to tell them it hurt, but without a body, I had no way to talk. The intensity of the man's step gradually increased - Perhaps he was afraid that if he lightened up, I would get away. While I was also saddened by the fact that I was being stepped on and couldn't move, the fact that it was my mother bird, of all people, who was causing me to suffer came as a much bigger sadness. I felt a new mixture of emotions that felt both like the sea of sadness and what the woman felt running into friends she didn't want to meet. It was fear. And resentment. I wanted to run up to my mother bird and be adored like the puppy and the woman. So why was he hurting me like this? He stepped on me even harder, and dirt flew up from the ground. I was pushed deeper into the dirt. Deeper, deeper... Would I be pushed underground?



The mother bird won't be able to catch me. Because when he finally takes his foot off to look at me, I won't be there. I've already run away... down...



Peaceful days followed. The people who had experienced those sudden fluctuations of emotion speculated that it all might have been caused by some abnormal climate phenomenon. Experts on TV cited seasonal depression as an example, and said it may have been due to the weather warming faster than usual, adding to the people's conviction. The problem was that the abnormal phenomenon was not limited to just one country. Modern science could not explain why the world's population all felt the same thing at the same time. Some groups viewed the event as a religious phenomenon, and others thought it might have been something similar to the instinctual group reactions of birds and rats right before a disaster.

We still felt uneasy. We were still unsure if Sopro had disappeared on its own or if we had eliminated it. If only someone could answer this for us, but unfortunately, as this was not World Z, it wasn't like we could reach out to Left Eye or Thunder for advice. As the members went on with their lives, they couldn't erase this feeling of subtle anxiety. It was then that we all received a call from Yunho saying he had found someone to consult with, and we got together again.

Yunho, currently majoring in archaeology, had been studying history and artifacts unexplained by science without his supervisor's knowledge. Knowing what he did about World Z and the Cromer, he was curious. However, he hid this curiosity from the other students and professors in his major. He was worried about what they might think of him, and Yunho himself wasn't confident that he could explain his rationale to them either. After the incident with Sopro, Yunho stayed in the library studying day and night as he looked for similar legends and artifacts recorded here in World A. By accident, he discovered a section of the library that was not on the book record map, and began reading through the books there as if he were possessed. He found a book by a scholar specializing in legends and myths based on the theory that the universe is composed of multiple dimensions. As soon as he read the introduction to the book, Yunho knew he needed to meet him. This was the introduction: "It is a great error to assume that the artifacts of our world can only be interpreted by the logic of our world."

Jongho: "That man... Isn't that Left Eye?"

Jongho cried out when he saw the scholar introduced by Yunho. None of the others could answer him - They just stood there frozen, staring. Only Yunho smiled. Yunho himself was quite surprised when he first met the scholar, who looked nearly identical to Left Eye, and he understood the members' reactions. The man, who had heard about Left Eye and their similar appearance from Yunho, greeted the members warmly.

**“I’ve heard that I look very similar to someone you met in a place called World Z. It seems that must be true.”**

They weren’t just similar in appearance. Even the fact that they both had one daughter was the same. In the corner of the lab was a family photo of Left Eye and his daughter, looking very much like family. Seeing how the members’ gaze lingered on the family photo, the scholar began to prepare tea and spoke fondly:

**“Fortunately, my daughter is doing very well.”**

Only then did the members, who were suddenly aware that their behaviour might have been somewhat rude, clear their throats and enter the lab. The Left Eye-like scholar placed his unpublished thesis on the table. He spoke carefully as the members looked at the thesis.

**“As a scholar, I am very grateful for the knowledge that my theory doesn’t have to end as just that. To think you’ve all been to World Z...”**

The members took their eyes off the paper for a moment and looked into his eyes. Despite everything, they were glad to know that there was someone, other than themselves, who believed that World Z exists, and that they had been there. Sensing that, the scholar spoke up again, more confident this time.

**“For the longest time, I’ve been thought of as a lunatic, an oddball, an 11-dimensional human being even in my own field. I am truly grateful to have met witnesses who say I am not crazy.”**

They all felt the same way. The members smiled in response.

**“This all gives me a little more confidence that my theory just might be right. Not only regarding dimensions - worlds - A and Z, but many other dimensions beyond that.”**

The scholar explained that there could be even more dimensions and universes than just the two worlds. And none of the members could refute this hypothesis as an ungrounded assumption. The moment that we, who had until that point believed World A was the only world, stepped into World Z, our understanding of the “one and only” universe was flipped completely upside down.

The existence of two dimensions also meant that more universes could very likely exist.

**“A long time ago, a tomb that appeared to belong to an ancient king was discovered. Until then, I thought that the king was only a figure of legend, but**

**the discovery of that tomb turned ‘legend’ into ‘history’. As part of the research team, I was elated at the thought of finding relics in the tomb. But it was too late.”**

Seonghwa: “It was too late?”

**“Thieves had already stolen a lot of the artifacts. And so those relics remained ‘legends’, not ‘history’. Everything that could prove their existence was gone.**

The scholar turned the page to a picture in his research paper. It was a picture of an ancient king. From the king’s neck hung a necklace made of woven reed grass. Its pendant was embedded with a jewel of a brilliant ruby color... A jewel that looked particularly similar to Sopro.

**“Legend says that it was a gift given to the king by a huge bird - a spiritual creature. As a stone with the ability to move the hearts of all things, it was gifted to the king as a symbol of his love for the people.”**

Mingi: “Hearts... Yeah, that does sound like Sopro.”

The members examined the paper again. Below the picture was the following text:

“Legends such as these often come with warnings. The nature of this stone is like a child, and the king in possession of this stone becomes the parent of that child. Therefore, if the king has an evil heart, the child will learn that wickedness, and if the king has a good heart, it will learn goodness.”

Wooyoung: “A child.”

The line comparing the nature of the stone to a young child caught Wooyoung’s eye.

**“I took this warning to mean something along the lines of ‘Those who lead must protect their hearts from evil.’ And though I never thought this legend to be something limited to World A, I never had enough evidence to support my theory. There were no relics I could turn to either. Then I met Yunho and thought: Maybe this legend actually originated in World Z. If not, then maybe it’s a legend that involves both worlds.”**

Perhaps the scholar’s words were true. Parts of this legend and what we knew about Sopro lined up almost too well. In both the legends of World A and World Z, Sopro was described as not an object, but as a “being with will, a spirit(靈), and a child.” So, as a being with its own will, just where did Sopro go? Did it really just disappear?

Their feeling of uneasiness remained, and their worries grew even more complex. Just then, Yeosang, who was searching for information related to Sopro on his tablet, shouted out urgently.

Yeosang “It didn’t disappear, it was just hiding!”

Yeosang turned his tablet to the members. On the screen was a live clip of a video creator searching for true ghost stories. He talked while walking through a graveyard. A statue that didn’t exist until yesterday suddenly appeared overnight, and monsters were rising from the ground. The bust statue, made of corpse, bone, soil and grass, had grown into a human shape. With a shriek, its eyes shot open. It looked enraged. People watching the live video called it “the resurrection of Frankenstein.”

Not long after, a war broke out over there.

## Golden Hour: Part 4

Note: The diary booklet also contains the diary entries from the previous album, Golden Hour Part 3 IYF edition.



Damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it!

Why is that both the world I once resided in and the world I encountered beyond it are so unbearably cruel only to me? After spending all that time alone, repeating questions into the void that never came back with answers, how did I end up alone again? If this is how it’s going to be, why did my mother bird even bother waking me? All those other birds hold their young so tenderly, so why does my mother bird hate me? If this is how it’s going to be, why was I even brought into this world at all? Had I never awakened, had I never learned emotion, I might have quietly existed, never knowing I was unhappy.

Shame quickly gave way to an overwhelming fear, and that fear made me resent the world, and resentment turned into anger. Even if no one taught me, I could now understand on my own. I was furious. I was indignant. If I could not be destroyed, then I would destroy everything in the world except myself.

Damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it!

This energy, born from anger, was more powerful than any other emotion I had ever felt. I dug frantically into the ground like a madman. I didn't know where I was going, but it didn't matter. I needed to find a new vessel. If I could only find a vessel, I could make them all like me. I don't ever want to be alone again. I wanted everyone to be angry. I wanted everyone, like me, to destroy everything in the world except me. Then I wouldn't be alone anymore. That's right. This anger I feel is justified.

After digging for what felt like ages, I hit a hard wooden plank, which made me even more upset. I followed the insects that were drawing through the gaps and cracks of the wooden plank deeper inside. Something lay there. A vessel. Just the thing I had been looking so desperately for. But this vessel held no emotion. That didn't matter though, if it had no emotion or memories, it wouldn't be able to cast me out like the others had done. But a single vessel wasn't enough for me to move as I wanted. I needed more, and so I collected empty vessels around me one by one.

I gathered the empty vessels, bone, dust, dirt, and grass to build a body. Little by little, I was able to claw my way back above ground. Now, even if those eight men, my mother bird included, found me again, they could no longer harm me. I had a body of my own.

As I reached the surface and emerged from the ground, my anger spread through the air, infecting everyone. People began attacking each other. Even the phones they carried in their hands erupted with rage. Now, in this world, there was nothing but me and those like me. I was thrilled.

The entire world fell into chaos. People lashed out at one another, verbally and physically. In some places, wars even broke out. Terror attacks occurred across the globe. The weakest were the first to get hurt and die. The scenes unfolding made it seem as if a new world war could erupt at any moment.

Only by stopping Sopro could the members awaken the world from the anger it had spread and stop the fighting. But now that Sopro had obtained a body formed from dead beings stripped of personal memories and emotion, they could no longer stop it in the same way they had before. It wasn't as if the members could spare time to go from person to person and wake each of them individually. But they couldn't just stand by and die either. They had to do something - anything.

Hongjoong: "There has to be some kind of memory that most, if not all, people share."

The members had come to Yeosang's villa to escape from the angry swarm of people and had resolved to find a way to awaken everyone. Their immediate priority was to stop the wars and acts of terror. The safety of the people came first. Getting rid of Sopro came next.

Hongjoong: "If we can find a way to wake even some of them, they'll be able to wake the people closest to them. All we need to do is show them how."

Yeosang: "How about we try hacking? It's the easiest way to connect with people around the world instantly - By waking everyone who has a phone, we can reach the most people."

Mingi: "If we need a more concrete line of connection, we could try using social media. Kind of like turning socialism into power lines and transmission towers."

Putting it simply, Mingi's idea went like this: Find a **power line** that links a large number of people and send out a **transmission wave** that could wake them all at once.

Mingi: "Hongjoong **hyung** and I have the most followers, so let's start with that line first."

Jongho: "Yeosang **hyung**, if you could set up a connection like Mingi **hyung** said, I think transmitting music might work the best."

Yunho: "But what kind of music? It would need to be something that everyone would recognize regardless of age or nationality."

Jongho: "Maybe not everyone, but I think I know a song that most people have probably heard at least once when they were little."

In place of a long explanation, Jongho began playing the piano. It was a familiar melody. The members all began humming the chorus together:

***"Let it be, Let it be, Let it be, Let it be Yeah, there will be an answer,  
Let it be~ Let it be, Let it be, Let it be, Let it be, whisper words of wisdom,  
Let it be~"***

Jongho finished playing the tune and began his explanation:

Jongho: "You all know, right? The Beatles' Let it Be from 1970. When Paul McCartney was going through a hard time, his mother came to him in a dream and told him **Let it Be!** Inspired by that dream, he wrote the song. Who **wouldn't** know this song?"

It was the perfect fit for the situation, too! And it's The Beatles, no less. A song that's been played on TVs, on the radio, and now on streaming platforms more times than there are people on Earth. The members couldn't think of a better song, and there wasn't time to consider any others.

Yeosang: "It sounds like a good idea to me. Mingi, Hongjoong hyung - Let me know your login info. I should be able to hack your followers."

Hongjoong: "All right. Let's try Jongho's idea. It's not like we have any time to waste. We'll be the first dominos to fall."

Music is often described as a time machine. The old songs your dad would play in the car on family trips. The lullabies your mom would sing while gently patting your back when you couldn't sleep after a scary dream. The idol songs you and your best friend were crazy about. The pop hits you would film little dance videos to with your friends during breaks at school. The folk songs you listened to on your way home at night, comforting you on days when nothing went your way. The jazz music that played as you gazed into the sunset with someone you loved. The ballads with lyrics that seemed like they were made for you when you listened to them after a breakup. The hip hop tracks you'd listen to on your way to work to pump yourself up for the day. The movie soundtracks an old flame adored. The classical music that you would hear in passing on days out. The new age music you went out of your way to listen to when you wanted your music taste to stand out. The trot songs your dad would sing to your mom at karaoke. The musical number that your brother sang so much it got stuck in your head.

Everyone has probably experienced that moment when a special song from your past suddenly plays, and in an instant, you're transported back in time. That was what the members wanted to ignite. They hoped that his song would draw out the people's warm, happy memories of the past.

Yeosang: "I'm ready. All that's left to do now is press enter, and we'll be connected to your followers' phone screens."

Sitting at the piano, Jongho nodded as if to say he was ready, too. At his signal, Yeosang pressed enter. Jongho began to play.

On the battlefield, in scenes of raging violence, and in cramped rooms where typewriters were sending out blades of words in the dark, Jongho's music began to play. The air, once drenched in screams and swears, was now filled with the beautiful melody, and the enraged people froze like broken robots. They tried to puzzle out what new kind of terrorism or expression of anger this was, but it was nothing of the sort. It was simply music.

A figure clutched their head as a wave of pain overcame them. Beneath the pain, a single memory resurfaced. In that memory, they gently sang this very song to their partner during a date, soothing them as they vented about the day's miseries. Yet another was struck by the throbbing pain of a headache. They recalled the memory of a mother softly humming this song while gazing at the passing scenery through the train window as she returned home from a fun vacation with her child. She beamed like a young girl, claiming she could sing every Beatles song. Some writhed in pain, heads heating up like popcorn on a stove. Pop! Memories long forgotten burst back to the forefront of their minds: The time they heard the crows break into cheers, singing the team's anthem when they hit their first home run after spending years in the minor leagues. The melody they played, all dressed up in front of everyone at a family gathering for the first time. The proud faces of their parents applauding their clumsy childhood performance. The memory of playing jump rope with the neighborhood girls long ago. The sound of music drifting from the streets as they ran to embrace their husband who had just safely returned from war.

Some could recall no memories at all, while others were driven into greater fury as memories full of anger resurfaced. But, for most, Jongho's music brought back memories of their childhood. The majority of those memories were of times with their family, and about eighty percent were warm, nostalgic recollections. After a brief headache, they were instantly released from their anger. Once they came to their senses, they learned how to free their loved ones from this anger through the members still linked to their phones. Upon figuring out what to do, they immediately shared videos, photos, music, scents, and food that would evoke fond memories to those they loved, awakening them from the anger, as well. In turn, the newly awakened learned from them how to save others, and together they hurried to assist more and more people close to them.

Those in shopping malls or schools used the speaker systems to play music that resonated with the people of their country and culture. It wasn't Jongho's piano rendition of Let It Be anymore, but other memorable tunes like those of the Beatles, Michael Jackson, Bob Marley, or opening themes from old cartoons. As more people awoke from their stupor of anger, the speed in which the phenomenon progressed picked up. Like a chain of dominos, they saved one another, creating a beautiful

picture in motion. Fond memories spread among them. People were saving each other!

Wee-woo, wee-woo. The loud wail of a siren rang out from outside the villa. Like moths to a flame, the members rushed to the window to look outside and peer down. It was Seonghwa driving a fire engine. Honk, honk! A small food truck pulled up behind the red fire engine, its hazard lights flashing. San leaned out and waved up at the members from the driver's seat of the food truck.

Seonghwa: "What are you standing around for? We've got that Frankenstein to deal with!"

Sopro's movements had grown sluggish, having sucked up all manner of things to build its new, giant body. Unable to move far from the graveyard where it was first discovered, it was found destroying buildings and attacking people at random. As this body had neither memory nor emotions of its own, there was no way for the members to make the creature cast out Sopro. They had no choice but to destroy the Frankenstein-body creation that Sopro had taken over.

Bringing along the fire engine for water and the food truck for fire and electricity, the members headed toward the old graveyard. The nearby village was in ruin, covered in mud as if a landslide had wiped the town away. Scattered among the mounds of mud lay fragments of bones and the remains of animals - A scene of utter devastation. The members held their breath and followed the creature's tracks. It wasn't long before a scream pierced the air, and in the direction of the scream, stood the towering Frankenstein monster.

Following Seonghwa's lead, the members leaped into action and aimed the hose at the creature to douse it with water. They hoped the intense water pressure would strip the decaying dirt flesh from its body. Seonghwa readied himself with the hose at the front, and upon his signal, Yunho turned the valve. The white hose twisted between Jongho and Wooyoung as though it were alive, and water burst through the nozzle gripped tight in Seonghwa's hands. A fierce torrent shot through the air, striking the creature's back. Only then did it sense them. Letting out a guttural roar, it turned around. Unintentionally, the members all swallowed hard at the same time. The creature seemed to examine the members one by one with what appeared to be its eyes, until its gaze froze on Wooyoung.

"Mo...mother bird..."

