

The Secret Game

The Secret Game : Part 1

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1

ARKANGELS PARADISE

BEFORE entering the café where my close friend, Reina, and I were meeting, I texted her to let her know I had arrived. When I walked inside the café, the message I had sent was quickly read.

"Yumi!"

A familiar voice called, and I jerked my head up from my phone and looked around the café for my friend. I eventually noticed her waving to get my attention while smiling brightly. I approached her with a light huff and a smile and soon sat next to her. Today was an exciting day for Reina since she'd be meeting her favorite K-pop idol, Arkane, in a meet and greet.

"I see you arrived early; you must adore that group to be this excited," I said as she giggled giddily in response.

"Who wouldn't be excited to meet the idol you've idolized since their debut?" She asked, passing me an iced coffee, "I'm glad I could go with someone; I apologize for reaching out to you at the last hour."

"Don't mention it; I couldn't say no to something given away for free!"

Originally, Reina was supposed to attend the event with our other friend, Akari, but she caught a fever this morning, so I've come to take her place. Although I'm not a great fan of the Korean group Arkane, I

do recognize them and know enough thanks to them both. So, I'll be able to recognize their faces and know who is who, and hopefully won't be deemed impolite during the event.

When we got to the location of the event, there were already hundreds



of people in line. I had no idea the group was so popular! Seeing this many people showing up at the event placed me in awe.

We promptly joined a line to enter the venue. It didn't take long for us to enter, and I was excited while waiting. Even though I wasn't a big fan, their songs aren't so bad. I listened to some of them and added a couple of songs to my favorite song playlist.

As I already stated, I knew very little about the K-pop group, Arkane, commonly known as Ark.E. for short. They are a thirteen-member group; two members are from North America, another two are from China, and the rest are Koreans. Their fans are known as ArkAngels, or Angels for short.

They were all attractive, so when the event began, all of the Ark Angels went berserk! The one thing I dislike about occasions like this, especially when it involves my best friend's favorite band, is that they would absolutely slap the crap out of me from all the giddiness, which hurts a lot.

I tried not to snap from the anguish Reina gave, keeping my cool throughout the group's introduction. And finally, the greeting with the boys began. As the fans filed onto the stage, one by one, to speak with their idols, I found myself feeling scared. It could have been because this was my first meet-and-greet, but my heart couldn't stop racing nervously.

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It was my turn after a few minutes of waiting, and before climbing the stairs, Reina wished me luck. I took a deep breath and sat in front of the first member, the group's leader, Seongho.

"Hello!" he said enthusiastically as I bowed and greeted him nervously. He sensed I was apprehensive and innocently worsened it by holding my hand tightly as he sweetly gazed at me. I knew he was doing it to help me feel better, but it felt like he was trying to kill me with his fan service.

Although his wholesomeness made me grin as I watched him sign the book in front of me, his hand appeared to be muscular and large. Despite its imposing appearance, it felt warm and put me at ease. I'm curious if he noticed how cold my hand was because of how anxious I was.

Jun was the second member in line, and when I sat in front of him, he smiled warmly. "Hi! How are you?" he said, and I responded with the same enthusiasm. Jun was one of the Chinese members, and because I knew that, I decided to speak the language of his birthplace and surprise him as well as the other Chinese member who was seated beside him, Yutong, aka Yuto for short.

After meeting them both, Joseph was the next in line, and he instantly complimented my ability to speak another language. I startled him even more when I spoke English, the language of his birthplace, Canada. I then explained that I had started learning other languages during my childhood because I thought mastering multiple languages would make me cool. In addition, I could use my talent to get a job and earn a lot of money to help me stay financially stable.

Seungjae was the next person in line after Joseph, and he welcomed me in Japanese with a bright smile. "Wow, you're very beautiful!" he complimented.

His unexpected praise surprised me, and I didn't know what to say, so I just snickered shyly while thanking him.

"You're handsome as well!" I replied, which made the man smile giddily as he cupped one side of his cheek and flicked his hand on the other.

"Oh, stop it, you!" He playfully bantered and then handed the book he had autographed to Milton, the next person in line.

Milton grinned and greeted me as he signed the book in front of him, and I greeted him back. I then remembered my gifts and distributed them to Milton, Yejoon, and Sujin. These three members are pizza junkies; therefore, I thought a pizza bar coupon would be an ideal gift for them and the other members. It was a small present from me to them to enjoy while they were in Japan to make their stay even more enjoyable.

Minjoon came up next. And when I met him, he was one of the members who truly drew my interest. He was very attractive. And then, like a domino effect, I met the most beautiful person I'd ever encountered. Jaeseong, known as Jae, had a mullet and looked stunning with it. He spotted me staring and chuckled at my reaction. I'd never been this star-struck before, and being caught was embarrassing.

Jiwoo, Jiho, and Jeongmin, the three people next door, laughed as well at my reaction. As if I wasn't already humiliated enough, I wanted to excuse myself and return to my seat in the middle of the hall.

Even though I was exhausted by the end, I had a good time. As I stepped off stage, a notification lit up on my phone. I initially assumed it was Akari, following up with questions about the meet-and-greet, but I was wrong. The message was from an app called 'G.A.M.E.S.,' which I only recently discovered. The strange part was, I had no recollection of downloading it the first time it appeared on my phone.

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Since I wasn't interested in online games and needed to stay focused on work to make a living, I deleted it with no hesitation. But when I got home, the app had returned on its own. And despite everything, I find myself addicted to it now.

Her_Ojic: There are new missions available for us. Do you want to do one together?

I replied with a smile.

Yumination: Sure, but not the goblins; their blood stinks, and I'm allergic to them in game.

While I was responding, Reina grew curious and leaned over my shoulder to peek at my phone. "Who are you messaging?" she asked.

"A friend."

Her jaw dropped open in disbelief when she realized it was from the game. "That game again? You sure are addicted to that. Anyway, how did your meet and greet go?"

Looking up from my phone, I smiled. "It wasn't that bad; I had fun!"

"Ooh, is Yumi finally becoming a fan of Arkane?" she teased, making me roll my eyes.

"Not quite," I chuckled. "And I'm guessing you had fun?"

"It was amazing, as always! They're all so handsome, and Jeongmin held my hand!" she squealed.

I grinned as she fangirled and shared her excitement. I was genuinely happy that she had such a great time. It had also been a long time since I had gone out for reasons other than work, and I was surprised by how refreshing it felt. I'm not much of a K-pop fan, but somehow, this group had managed to ease my stress and help me relax in a way I hadn't expected.



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WE went back to my place after the event for a sleepover. For dinner, we ordered chicken, and I prepared some side dishes and rice. As we ate, Reina decided for us to watch Arkane's show on YouToo.

"Arkane? Again?" I groaned softly, my tone already giving away how sick I was of them.

"Because they're amazing?" she replied, as if it were obvious. "From night till morning, I'll be playing Ark.E.-related shows whether you like it or not!"

I gave in and let her have her way. To my surprise, I actually started enjoying their content. Each episode made me laugh and kept me hooked until the end. But eventually, Reina's soft snores filled the room.

I glanced over to see her fast asleep. Checking the clock, I saw it was already 11p.m. I quietly cleared the table, set her up comfortably on the couch with a pillow and blanket, and then finished washing the dishes.

Even though it was late, it felt like the perfect time to play. Once everything was cleaned up, I checked to see if Reina was entirely asleep before heading to the bedroom and opening the app.

This G.A.M.E.S. application is not your typical online game. When you log in, it actually transports you to a different realm where you play inside the game itself. I've been keeping it a secret, and I haven't told

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anyone about it, not even Reina or Akari. And honestly, even if I tried, no one would ever believe me.

As I logged in, a strange light flashed from my phone screen, pulling me into the game and transforming my attire in an instant. When the glow faded, I was standing inside a cabin that served as my in-game home. A sudden, loud knock was heard from the front door seconds after I arrived.

I opened it cautiously. "Yes?"

"Hey, let's go!" boomed a tall, distinguished gentleman who flashed a broad smile.

He is known as Heric Freeman, a companion who shared my strange fate. Like me, he had been brought here by the app. I still remembered my first time vividly, the fear of waking up in an unfamiliar world, and the uncertainty of not knowing what to do. Anyone would've been terrified.

"Sure, just give me a minute to change. Come in!" I said, heading towards my room while Heric waited in the living area, still chatting excitedly.

"The Guild has some great missions for level 2 users like us!"

I slipped into a brown cape and sturdy boots, rolling my eyes. "Don't tell me. Another goblin-hunting quest? No, thank you!"

"Nope! You mentioned you wouldn't like that, so instead I got us some Tigders to kill!"

I shuddered. "Ugh. As much as I despise spiders, it pays well."

Tigders were abominations, monsters with the striped face of a tiger grafted onto the hairy, eight-legged body of a tarantula. My worst nightmare.

"You know what they say," Heric shrugged. "Face your fear if you want to achieve your goals."

After we've gathered our weapons and supply pouches, we set off through the forest toward the cave where the Tiggers were spotted. The closer we drew, the more tightly my chest constricted. My heart pounded, my breath came shallow, and every step sent a shiver racing down my spine.

"Are we there yet?" I muttered.

Heric glanced at his navigator. "Just behind that big tree up ahead." He pointed toward the massive trunk.

We both examined the massive tree from bottom to top, spotting four tiny Tiggers and one adult Tiger perched on a tree branch. Another shudder coursed through me at the sight of their hairy, circular bodies, gleaming fangs, and twitching limbs.

They noticed our presence as we stared at them, which prompted the four baby Tiggers to jump off the tree, blocking our way from every angle and trapping us in the midst. They roared, exposing their razor-sharp teeth in an attempt to frighten us. As much as I wanted to flee and escape, we were here for them, and bringing back a failed mission would result in our Adventurer's Card being withdrawn.

Heric drew his massive katana, its blade catching the dim light as I summoned my power. Energy surged through me, flooding every nerve in preparation for battle. Just as we lunged forward, the adult Tiger dropped from above, crashing between us. Heric was forced left while I dove to the right.

I focused, channeling the energy inside me. My brown pupils shimmered, shifting into iridescent rainbows as the spell took form. With a thrust of my hand, two of the smaller Tiggers were trapped in globes of swirling water, their screeches muffled as they drowned inside the bubbles. The adult Tiger spun towards me, ready to attack, only to halt at the sound of steel cutting through flesh. Behind it, Heric's

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katana flashed, and in a single sweep, the smaller Tiggers were shredded into pieces.

"Hey! If you want to make money, don't ruin their fur!" I shouted.

"At least we have their meat." He replied, his eyes narrowing on the adult. "And this one's heart."

He charged forward just as the Tiger lunged at him. In a swift move, Heric bent his knees, sliding beneath the beast with his back arched, his katana carving deep into its belly. The monster let out a guttural screech as blood poured from the wound, collapsing heavily onto the ground.

"Is it dead?" I asked, dissolving the water bubbles and releasing the smaller Tiggers' limp bodies.

"I think so; it's not moving."

But the creature wasn't finished. With a sudden burst of strength, it leapt to its feet and pounced toward Heric. "Watch out!" I cried as I severed its head off with the force of the wind, sparing the lad from harm.

Heric stumbled back, glaring at me. "You said not to ruin the fur!"

"I didn't!" I protested. "This monster's head would sell for a lot, plus the meat and fur on both sides aren't damaged."

"I just hope the heart isn't damaged," he muttered, worriedly.

One way to gain money in this world is to be an adventurer, whose main job is to hunt, kill, and survive. Monsters vary in level, and the higher the level, the greater they're worth for. In this world, each monster serves a variety of functions for humanity. The fur of the monsters can be used for clothing and equipment; the head and weapons (if they possess them) can be utilized for adornment; and the meat can be used for food, which is actually rather tasty. The heart, which Heric bemoans, is the most expensive part of the monster.

When these monsters die, their hearts crystallize into real-life diamonds. And their sizes and hues vary according to their level.

I've lost track of how many days I've been playing this game; that's how addictive it's become. Here, death isn't permanent, and players have infinite lives. I've only died once, but Heric? He's died countless times. And yet, despite being Death's favorite, he's always managed to spawn his way back to life.

Once Heric finished assembling the monster's fur, heart, and head, we made our way to the Adventurer's Guild to sell the loot to upgrade our Travelers' Card. Every monster we defeat is recorded inside our travelers' card, along with some of our personal information. Our current rank and, most significantly, our growing wealth.

"Think we'll make a lot of money off of these?" Heric inquired.

"Of course, either way, at least we're getting paid." I shrugged.

He smirked. "Hmm, fair enough."

When we arrived at the Adventurer's Guild, we handed up our loot to a member of the staff behind the counter.

"Out for some kills again, Heric?" Inquired a beautiful woman. Her name is Angela York. She is a friend of Heric's and mine and works as a staff member of the Adventurer's Guild, managing missions, treasures and loot. Like us, she had been drawn into this world by the app but chose to work in business rather than hunting.

"Again? You mean he went hunting before I joined him?" I asked, surprised.

"Before this pair hunt with you, he had four solo hunts," she explained.

"Damn! Are you short on cash or something?" I teased.

"No," he shook his head, handing over the Tigger remains, and Angela accepted the loot and began tallying. "I was just bored, and I

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needed some exercise.” He shifts his focus back on business. “So, how much money did we make with those Tiggers?”

“Because you both submitted four small tiggers and one large one,” The rhythmic tapping of her calculator filled the air until she clicked the final total. “You both receive two gold coins!”

“Heck yeah!” I cheered, grinning.

“That’s enough hunting for me today!” Heric said.

“Oh, really? Are you sure you don’t want to go on another pair hunt with me?” I nudged.

“I have something really important to do later, and I promised my pal that I would join him on the double date he set up for me.”

I gasped, widening my eyes in mock surprise. “Ohhh? Is Heric about to enter a relationship?” I teased, wiggling my shoulders.

“Ooh la la!” Angela laughed and playfully joined in the teasing.

Watching his two best friends enjoying their teasing, his eyes rolled back, and he snickered, “Not happening.” He dismissed. “Besides, I’m far too busy hunting in this realm to waste time on relationships.”

Angela and I traded a puzzled look before turning back to him. “And this is why you’re still single,” Angela sighed.

“Don’t come to me if you regret that decision,” I added.

“Ditto,” she chimed in.

Heric groaned. “And these are supposed to be my closest friends?”

“Being someone’s therapist isn’t my thing,” I said, then waved. “See you tomorrow!” With that, I left the Guild and headed back to my cabin.

This realm had begun to feel like a second home—a place where I didn’t have to stress over money. But, of course, I should not become accustomed to this gaming lifestyle. Living in the G.A.M.E.S. world was a privilege, yes, but one that could breed greed if I wasn’t careful. No matter how tempting it was to stay, this wasn’t my world.

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Reality is the Earth dimension, where I truly belonged.

I logged out, and the moment I returned to my room, I collapsed onto my bed and drifted into sleep as if nothing had happened.

3

WELCOME TO G.A.M.E.S

ANOTHER exhausting day at work. Just one more hour until I could finally go home. In the middle of this snowy, freezing weather, I stood at the counter, waiting for customers to place their orders.

People think being a cashier only requires knowing how to handle money and run the register. But in truth, the hardest skill isn't math; it's smiling. No matter how bad your day is, or how entitled a customer acts, you're expected to greet them with a cheerful look. One slip, and you risk losing your job.

My boss called out to me while I was dozing off, my eyes closed and chin resting on my hand. "Mizukasa-san, can you take care of the menu board outside?" she inquired.

"What if a client comes in? I don't want to leave them alone," I shrugged.

"If I were you, I wouldn't want to disobey the boss," another employee teased.

I huffed and mumbled, "I'd rather stay inside than freeze out there."

"I'll deal with the cashier; now go." With a sigh, I let myself be ushered toward the front door, chalk and the new menu list shoved into

my hands. The cold hit me instantly as I stepped outside, clutching the supplies and bracing myself to decorate the board.

"You're the only artist we have, and we can't afford a basic-looking menu board for customers to look at," my manager remarked.

"I never expected this to be one of my duties from working here," I grumbled.

"Just put up with it; you'll get paid more."

"I hope so," I murmured. Kneeling in front of the board, I wiped it clean before starting to scribble the new items. I can't wait to get home and play G.A.M.E.S., I thought as I kept writing.

—Seoul, South Korea—

Author's P.O.V

The boys arrived home after a long day of work, returning from their Japan tour. Yejoon, Jaeseong, and Seungjae collapsed on the couch, relieved to be back home in Seoul.

"I'm heading to my room; I can hear my bed calling to me to lie down," Jeongmin groaned as he trudged towards his room.

"Don't forget to change before going to bed," Jaeseong reminded him.

"Anyone want some ice cream?" Sujin called as he made his way to the kitchen.

"How about a cup of tea instead?" Yuto suggested.

"I bought some bubble tea ice cream a while ago. I'm curious how it tastes."

"Bubble tea, obviously?" Seongho winced, as if the answer was already evident.

"You always make me sound dumb, hyung."

"It's called common sense."

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As the others chuckled, Jeongmin shuffled back into the living room in his pajamas, still looking worn out. "I thought you were going to sleep, Jeongmin hyung?" Yuto said.

"I came because I heard you talking about eating ice cream."

"And I'm assuming you'd want one," Jun teased.

"Yes, please."

"Right on it," Sujin said, returning with the box of ice cream. He handed one to each of them, and soon the living room was filled with the quiet comfort of friends sharing dessert before bed.

"There goes my diet," Seungjae muttered, feeling guilty as he continued munching.

"You had an entire pizza a while ago. There was no diet to begin with," Yejoon shot back, savage as ever. Seungjae pouted, then launched into a whiny defense of himself, which only made the others laugh harder.

Meanwhile, Jiwoo sat apart, preoccupied with his phone. His brows furrowed deeper as he tapped and swiped, trying again and again to remove an app that refused to disappear. Noticing his frustration, Minjoon leaned closer. "You okay? You look annoyed." At that, the rest of the boys turned their attention toward him.

With an exasperated sigh, Jiwoo finally spoke, "There's this app on my phone. I don't remember installing it, but no matter how many times I try to delete it, it just keeps coming back."

"Why did you download it in the first place?" Joseph questioned, brows wrinkled in confusion.

"I didn't; it just showed up when I was on my phone before our flight back here."

"Here," Minjoon said, holding out his hand. "Let me have a look at it."

Reluctantly, Jiwoo handed the puppy his phone and began investigating.

"What's the name of the app?" Jiho inquired.

"GAMES with dots between each letter."

In the midst of their conversation, Minjoon had his full concentration on his phone, busy studying it. He launched the program without hesitation, revealing a sleek login page. "Oh, it's a gaming app!" He announced.

"Gaming app? Wait—Minjoon!" Jiwoo's voice shot up in alarm, his brows furrowed.

"What?!" He blinked, startled by the outburst.

"Did you seriously open it without asking me first?"

"I just wanted to see what it was!" Minjoon defended himself.

"That wasn't a smart idea." Yejoon scolded, shaking his head in disapproval. "It could've been a virus."

"Or someone trying to hack into Jiwoo Hyung's phone." Milton added grimly.

"With how shady things are these days, you can't trust random apps," Seongho reprimanded.

But despite the members' warnings, Minjoon ignored them, continuing to inspect the app, curiosity pulling him deeper. He pressed the login button, causing the screen to flicker, then went completely black.

Minjoon let out a soft gasp, panic rising in his voice, and Jiho overheard. "Ah! Minjoon hyung broke the phone!" He cried, and the rest immediately erupted into a chorus of complaints, scolding him in sync.

"I told you not to mess with it!" Jaeseong shouted.

"Sorry! I thought it was just a game!" Minjoon pleaded, his face pale with guilt.

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Just then, every phone in the room chimed at once, a notification received. One by one, the boys checked them; each of them now had the intro for the app glowing on their screens.

It was strange because none of them had downloaded it.

And yet, it was there.

"Welcome to G.A.M.E.S.! Your goal is to have fun while also surviving! Good luck!"

Everyone froze in place as the app spoke. It was just so out of the ordinary, something they never expected.

"What the—?" Jiwoo started, but his words were cut off when all of a sudden, a strange light flashed from their phone screen, blinding their sight, and when the glow faded, the comfortable living room they were once in was suddenly flooded with the aroma and sound of nature. Formally sitting on a couch, but now standing in the middle of the wilderness, phone in hand.

Jun spun in place, looking around fearfully, his eyes widened. "What the hell is this?" Trees, branches, grass, and more trees were what he could find no matter where he looked.

"This...isn't Seoul." Seongho muttered, scanning their whereabouts.

"Not even close," Jeongmin added under his breath.

"We're outside?" Jiho questioned, though his frown deepened as he looked at the unfamiliar darkness of the forest.

"No kidding," Minjoon sighed, shaking his head.

Jaeseong rounded on Minjoon, his voice sharp. "What the hell have you gotten us into, Minjoon?"

The boy raised both hands, his face pale. "I didn't do anything!" He defended, "I didn't expect some stupid app to bring us here!"

Panic buzzed through the group, tension snapping like static. Seungjae's chest tightened at the sight of his co-members losing com-

posture, his own fear clawing higher. This was the first time something this odd had happened to them, and it made him uneasy. "Stay calm and don't panic!" he forced himself to shout over them, tears forming quickly.

The boy was trying to look brave, but through his bravery, Milton spotted the tremor in Seungjae's hands and the uneven rise and fall of his chest. Slightly ventilating. "Seungjae—," Milton started, stepping closer.

"I said be calm!" Seungjae snapped, though the panic in his voice betrayed him.

Milton placed both hands firmly on his shoulders, grounding him. "Seungjae-ah, look at me. Breathe. We're all here right with you. Just breathe," he inhaled slowly, guiding the boy into matching his rhythm until his frantic breaths began to steady.

Amid the chaos, Yuto realized their familiar pajamas were gone, replaced by strange new outfits. Cloaks, boots, and belts heavy with pouches. Armor gleamed on some of them, while others wore travel-ready clothes that looked straight out of a fantasy novel. They were all wearing different outfits, except for Seungjae and Sujin, who wore the same design of clothing.

But how come?

He notified the others about their unnoticed clothing alteration. They were all so preoccupied with what was going on that they didn't realize their outfits had changed, adding to the perplexity.

Jiwoo, who had been quiet until now, felt a heavy certainty settle over him. His lips parted as he exhaled in disbelief. He didn't want to believe such a thing could happen, but there was no other explanation for their situation. "We're inside the gaming app." Everyone froze, the

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silence heavy until Yejoon barked a laugh, though there was no humor in it.

"Hyung, do you expect us to believe that?"

"Yeah," Joseph scoffed, shaking his head. "Stuff like this only happens in anime or movies."

"And I'm very sure this isn't Jumanji, because no one here became Dwayne Johnson, Karen Gillan, Kevin Hart, or Jack Black," Seungjae reasoned.

"And Nick Jonas." Sujin added.

Jiwoo had anticipated their reactions after hearing their responses, but everything seemed too good to be true. Maybe it was all a dream, and they were all dreaming the same thing. They were all so fatigued from their tour that their dreams became intertwined.

Yuto huffed, his mind weary by what was going on, but when he turned his head behind him, he became aware of a presence, spotting a pair of glowing eyes behind a bush. What's worse is that there weren't just one or two of them, but more than he could imagine.

A shiver ran down his spine, his heart pounding as words stumbled out of his mouth. "G-guys... I think we're not alone." He said, loud enough, fear evident in his voice.

Almost instantly, the bushes behind them began to shake. Everyone froze, their bodies trembling as they fixed their eyes on the movement. And as they remained cautious, Jaeseong squinted into the shadows, catching more than just the eerie glow of red eyes, and what he saw made his blood run cold.

"Aliens!" he cried, pointing frantically to the bush he was keeping an eye on, and before anyone could react, one creature burst from the bush, followed by three more, lunging straight at them.

Seongho, standing closest, instinctively shielded Jaeseong with his own body, bracing for the strike of the monster who had their swords raised, preparing an attack. Just when it seemed too late, three arrows whistled through the air. Wind-powered magic propelled them forward, each arrow slamming into the monster's head with deadly precision.

They were all relieved when the goblins were dead, but a tint of horror lingered as their breath trembled when they huffed. But then their eyes fell on the figure who had saved them. A young woman, dressed in the same outfits as Jeongmin, lowered her bow. She looked to be in her early twenties. Shock washed over her face as she stared at the thirteen boys before her, faces she clearly recognized. And as a result of the shock, all she could say was, "What are you all doing here?"

When the Arkane members realized the woman recognized them, they were just as surprised as she was.

"You...you know who we are?" Seongho inquired.

"I do." She admitted with a quick nod, still in awe. "I'm not sure how you got in here, but questions can wait. Right now, we have some goblins to deal with."

"You mean those alien-like creatures were goblins?" Yejoon asked, baffled.

"Goblins actually exist?" Jiho gasped.

"Yes." She said firmly. "If you have any other questions, please reserve them for later. For now, do any of you know how to fight?"

"Some of us have black belts in taekwondo and karate; I think we can manage," Jeongmin replied, though his voice trembled.

"Good. Then, get ready, because we're surrounded by a pack of them."

At her words, goblins burst from the shadows, their ugly forms stepping into view. Some froze in terror; others tightened their grip on

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whatever items they could use as weapons. With no other choice, they launched into battle.

The fight scattered them quickly. Each member attacked however they could: slicing, punching, stabbing, suffocating—whatever it took to survive and destroy these monsters, and things were going better than expected.

Until, Jeongmin hit one of the Goblins. Its blood splattered all over and onto his forearm, searing his skin like acid. He cried out, gritting his teeth against the burning pain.

Yuto, who was nearby, froze at what had transpired. When he saw his good friend in anguish as a result of those monsters, he felt enraged. The world around him slowed as his eyes became more technical. In a flash, he lunged forward, chopping the five goblins in the span of a heartbeat with just a wooden stick.

When the last fell, Yuto stared at his hands in disbelief. But Jeongmin's agonized cries snapped him back. Looking at his friend writhing in pain, Yuto turned to the others, voice sharp with urgency, informing everyone else with what just happened.

"Shoot, there are too many! If we stay, we'll lose the fight!" The woman shouted, and hearing that prompted Yuto to carry Jeongmin into his arms, rushing toward her as the rest of the group followed, retreating from the battlefield as fast as they could.

The woman was the last to leave. Her irises flashed with rainbow light as she stomped the ground, raising a wall between their foes to slow them down, before she turned and sprinted after the others.



NEW PLAYERS, NEW POWERS

Yumi's P.O.V

I SWIFTLY let the members into my cabin, where Yuto laid Jeongmin on the couch. His condition worsened quickly; his entire forearm was badly burned, raw with what looked like second-degree burns. The sight made everyone gasp, dread crawling down their spines.

"What the hell happened to him?" Joseph worriedly asked.

"Will he be okay?" Seongho added, tense.

As they surrounded the injured, the members' concern rose.

"Please, everyone, stay calm," I urged, trying to soothe them.

"How can we stay calm when Jeongmin is like this?" Jaeseong shot back.

I sighed, realizing that using words wouldn't be of any use. I didn't want them to see what I was about to do, but I couldn't let the poor boy suffer any longer. Kneeling beside him, I placed my palm gently over his wound, only for Yejoon to grab my wrist, his glare sharp and intimidating.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"I'm going to heal him." I replied hastily, avoiding his gaze; however, for him, this wasn't enough reassurance.

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"This isn't the movies; what are you doing?" He asked once more; his irritation grew.

I sighed, then met his eyes, matching his intensity but speaking with calm resolve. "Trust me."

There were still traces of doubt in him. But seeing the situation his friend was in and the agony he could see in his expression, he had no other choice but to put his trust into me. And finally, he released my hand with a heavy sigh.

I went on with my plan, placing my palm over on top of the burn as Jun tried to keep Yejoon calm. My pupils shifted to rainbow hues as I whispered, "Heal," and a ball of light glowed beneath my hand, warm and steady. The magic spread across Jeongmin's arm, soothing the injury until the burns faded completely. His pained grunts stopped, and slowly, he opened his eyes to find his friends staring at him in stunned silence, as though they had witnessed a miracle.

"What the—I survived?" Jeongmin mumbled, confused as to why he was suddenly indoors.

"Yes, you did. We all did," Joseph replied, relieved, as he gently patted the boy's head. For a moment, peace settled in, until the memory of burning pain struck him.

He bolted upright with a shout. "My arm—!" He glanced at his forearm, expecting it to be burned, but instead found it clean and smooth. "...Is healed?"

"This woman healed you. With magic!" Seungjae said, still astonished.

"How?" Jeongmin asked, bewildered.

I sighed, realizing it was time to answer some of their many, many questions.

"Now that we're somewhere safe...can you tell us where we are?" Jaeseong asked.

"We're not inside a game, are we?" Milton pressed.

"We are," I answered, still kneeling on the floor. Their eyes widened, as everyone felt a mix of emotions. Some were shocked, some were confused, and some were even thrilled and in awe.

"But that's impossible! I mean, how can that happen when magic doesn't exist in real life?" Jiho exclaimed.

"It doesn't, and I'm not sure how this happened," I admitted with a weary sigh as I rose to my feet.

"What do you mean you don't know?" asked Sujin.

I sat down on the wooden table behind me, continuing, "When you first entered this realm, did you receive an app called G.A.M.E.S.?"

"Jiwoo had it, but when Minjoon logged in, it suddenly appeared on all our phones." Joseph explained.

"That happened to me, too; I suddenly received this app on my phone that I didn't download, and if I remove it, it returns as if I never deleted it at all!"

"That's exactly what happened to me!" Jiwoo exclaimed, relieved he wasn't the only one going through the same strange phenomenon.

"I thought, 'Why not check what this app is about?' I tapped the login button, thinking I had to join in with my mail account like any other game, but it didn't, and instead it took me right to the forest where you guys appeared."

"Does that mean you're a victim too?" Jeongmin asked.

I nodded. "That's right."

"Then...can you tell us what this game is about?" Seongho pressed.

"It's a game of survival."

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Seungjae stiffened, heart racing anxiously at what I said, "Wait, are we going to kill each other to survive?" He asked, "Because I'm not up to that."

Immediately I shook my head, and just that simple reassurance eased him. "No. This is an open-world survival game. Kill monsters or take a non-combat mission, get paid, and then live a so-called normal life in the game." I gave a small shrug. "That's how I've been living here so far."

"Living here? You mean...you haven't left yet?" Yuto inquired worriedly.

"I can log out anytime," I explained. "But the game's addictive, so I keep coming back whenever I'm bored." I rubbed the back of my neck with a sheepish chuckle, while the others exchanged uneasy nods.

"So... how do we get out?" Yuto pressed again.

"By accomplishing a mission."

"Where can we get this mission?" Jiwoo inquired.

"At the Adventurer's Guild," I said, "that's where all the missions are posted and where we sell loot for money."

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go!" Seungjae shouted impatiently.

"But...can we even accomplish it?" Milton questioned, doubting his abilities.

"What do you mean?" Yejoon asked, his face flushed with confusion.

"I mean, after witnessing what can happen if we get harmed...we're not skilled enough to take on whatever monsters are out there."

Seungjae scoffed in disbelief, "So what, you're saying we should just stay trapped in this game forever?" he shot back. Though Seungjae did make a point, everyone agreed with Milton. They weren't sure if they

were strong enough to defeat something like those monsters they've encountered, and as far as they knew, none of them had magic.

"Oh, but you do," I corrected gently.

Their heads snapped up in unison, eyes wide.

"We...do?" Jiho inquired, stunned.

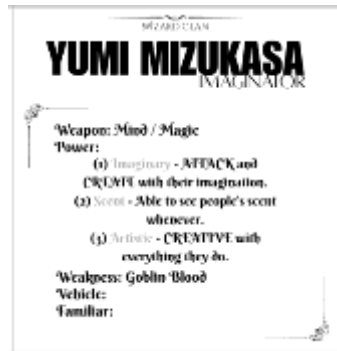
"Yeah! Haven't you noticed your outfits?" I gestured toward them.

"Each one shows what power you have, whether you belong to the Medicine Clan, the Wizard Clan, or the Warrior Clan."

"What kind of power did you get?" Yejoon questioned.

"I'm The Imaginator from the Wizard clan; it's hard to explain, but... here, let me show you."

I tapped my chest twice, then snapped my finger. Instantly, a glowing box appeared, floating in the air before them. The boys gasped, their disbelief giving way to awe.



They couldn't believe they were witnessing something so magical, something that they had thought could only happen in movies, anime, or fantasy novels.

"W-what is that?" Jun asked, his mouth slightly agape in awe.

"It's my character information box," I explained. "It shows my full name, the clan I belong to, and the power I possess. It also lists my weapon, familiar, and—optionally—a vehicle. Only a few people have them, and I'm not one of those few."

As the boys leaned in to study the floating display, Yuto's eyes narrowed in confusion. "What's a familiar?" he asked, unfamiliar with the term and had no notion what it means or how it appears.

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"It's your companion," I said. "A familiar can take the form of a human, an animal, or even a creature from a fable."

"But yours is blank," Jaeseong pointed out.

"Right. I haven't found mine yet. To obtain a familiar, you need to travel to a specific location and undergo a series of difficult tests. Which I'm still not prepared for."

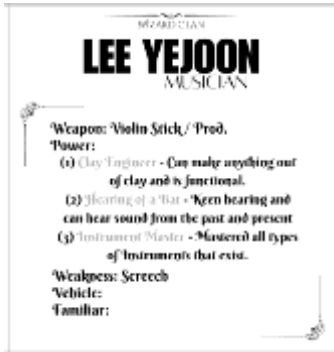
Seongho, still studying the box, froze when he read my name. His brows knit together as he tried to recall where he'd heard it before, then his eyes widened. "Ah! You're the fan from the Tokyo fan conference!" he blurted.

His recognition caught me completely off guard. I'm not going to lie, I was stunned, but the fact that he remembered me made me feel moved. "I'm shocked you still remember," I admitted, quickly dismissing the box with a snap and two taps to my chest.

The others began recalling the same memory. Some remembered me as the ArkAngel who spoke five languages, others as the one who handed out free pizza coupons, and still others recognized my face. Their warm recognition moved me, though at the same time, it stirred guilt. They called me an ArkAngel, a loyal fan, but in truth, I was only a semi-fan. I chose to keep the truth to myself and go with the flow.

"So... how did you make that box appear?" Jiwoo asked curiously, and I gladly demonstrated. Once everyone understood the trick, we went through each member's information box one by one.

It was exhilarating to discover what powers these boys possess. Based on their outfits, they all appear to have different ones. Only thirteen powers exist in this realm: Herbalist, Zoologist, Musician, Hunter, Chef, Songist, Clown, Knight, Imaginator, Ele-nder, Samurai, Artist, and Gamer.



Starting off with Yejoon, he obtained the Musician power.

This man is a musician in our realm, and now, seeing him as one here too, I couldn't help but believe Yejoon was truly born for music. As everyone leaned closer to study his information box, the tension that

had filled the room was rapidly replaced by excitement.

"What is a screech?" Jun inquired after reading the information.

"Isn't that the sound you make when you scrape the blackboard with your nails?" Sujin inquired.

"Yes, that's exactly it!" I replied.

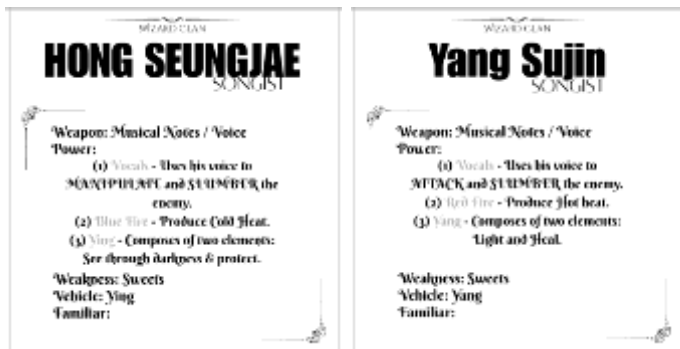
"Can we test it out?" Yejoon asked eagerly, but before anyone could react, I swiftly declined, surprising the lads with a protective yell.

"You can die easily in this game," I warned. "Just like in any other, a single hit to your weakness can kill you. Even if you spawn back, the pain of death here is unbearable. I've been through it myself, and I'll never forget how agonizing it was. That's why I'm far more cautious now."

Hearing this, Yejoon's curiosity faded, and he wisely chose not to push further.

Next came Sujin and Seungjae. At first glance, their outfits seemed identical, only with inverted colors—Sujin's black trimmed with white, and Seungjae's white trimmed with black. The simplicity of their designs made me wonder if they were somehow partners or perhaps shared powers. And seeing their information boxes clarified everything.

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We learned that they both have vehicles! Which is an incredible advantage for us. If our quest requires us to travel beyond Houndlet Kingdom, we won't be stuck walking or relying on a cart. The thought of flying through the skies has been on my bucket list ever since I arrived in this realm, and I couldn't be more excited to finally try it!

Another detail we noticed is that yin and yang are both written in their info boxes. This game software appears to pair them as partners, and being the yin and yang songist pair is actually quite rare. When I told them how powerful this pairing truly was, both Seungjae and Sujin blushed, amazed yet flustered. "It makes us feel unique," they said.

The only downside to their powers was their weakness, an allergy to sweets. Sadly, this meant they couldn't enjoy any of the delicious desserts this world had to offer, even though I could name plenty worth trying. It's a shame they won't be able to taste them.

The next person we checked was Jaeseong.

When we saw his power and identity, the lads laughed at how fitting his power was for him. He was the Clown. Fortunately, he possesses



a balloon dog vehicle, which is ideal for a clown. It's interesting that when the game provides you a vehicle, it always gives you something related to your power.

But jokes aside, the boys and I agreed that Jaeseong's power wasn't all that horrible. In fact, it appeared to be incredibly powerful—perfect for a clown. He has the ability to manipulate dolls, shadows, and the strings that make him look like that one super hero. The clown was overjoyed with his newfound abilities.

Next up is Minjoon, who is a Chef.

"I knew you'd have something you're already interested in!" Milton yelled happily after reading the information box, and I was thinking exactly the same thing; we were all thinking the same thing. Minjoon being the chef was such a perfect fit for him, and it excited him a lot.



Everything was fine until he saw his weakness. He was allergic to seafood. On one hand, Minjoon was sad, but on the other hand, Jiwoo couldn't contain his laughter, teasing the boy. He, ironically, has the same allergy as Minjoon, but in the real world. It's unusual to see another person suffer from the same allergy, but in this virtual realm, it made Jiwoo delighted.

"Shouldn't chefs not be allergic to food? And of all things, seafood?"

As you can tell, Minjoon wasn't delighted and refused to acknowledge it. He loved food—especially seafood—so discovering he couldn't enjoy it in this realm was like a punch to the gut. His pride as a chef was thoroughly wounded.

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"At the very least, you can still eat meat; just be happy it's the only food you can easily avoid," I shrugged.

"Unless someone despises you," Sujin added slyly, "they could put seafood seasonings in your dish."

The thought made Minjoon scowl, but in truth, such a scenario is extremely unlikely to happen, and the reason for this is because Minjoon possesses the Vision Power, which allowed him to detect dangers—including poisoned or tampered food—before taking a bite.

Next is Milton, who has the Hunter's power.



"Now we know who to call when we need someone to haul our stuff," quips Jaeseong after spotting the 'Storage' power. He couldn't help but chuckle and take advantage of the situation.

"As for the compass, we'll need your assistance if we get lost," Joseph added.

Milton understood they were joking, but he also knew he'd be needed in those scenarios. He wasn't delighted, but he had no choice but to assist if he wanted to make it out alive with the rest of them.

Seongho was up next! When they saw what his given power was, everyone was astounded.

He was our beautiful knight in shining armor! As a result, he was heavily teased by the members, making Seongho blush with humiliation. They teased him even more when



Seungjae told the others about his 'Protection' power, which made him look even more like a knight from a fable.

"Oh my, save me, my knight in shining armor!" teasingly exclaimed Sujin.

"Oh, shut up!" Seongho tried hard not to smile, but the boys picked up on his shyness.

His timidity rapidly gave way to glee as he crouched behind Jaeseong, pretending to bite his shoulder in embarrassment. Everyone in the room then burst out laughing at the boy.

Next up, Joseph.

"Oh, you're our zoologist!" I said, surprised.

"Is that...good?" Joseph asked a little nervously.

"Yes! We're fortunate to have someone who specializes in medicine and animals. You'll be able to talk to animals, which means we can use them for assistance. And as part of the Medicine Clan, you can even create cures powerful enough to save someone who's been fatally poisoned or injured by a monster," I explained.

The only concern was Joseph's sensitivity to blood. We were not sure yet what kind of blood he was allergic to, so I urged Joseph to always thoroughly cover his body and stay away from the blood of the monster he kills, just in case. I also instructed the other members to always protect him. If they do not want Joseph to die, we must do what I say. Better safe than sorry.

Minjoon was touched that I was doing all of this to safeguard his dearest members, having noticed my overprotective disposition. It also



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made him wonder whether I had encountered something horrific in the past that caused me to react in this manner.

"Have you ever died in this game?" Minjoon asked.

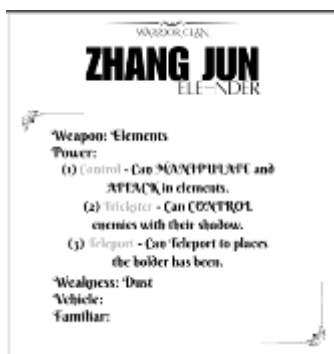
"Yes, just once," I admitted. "I'm allergic to goblin's blood, and I didn't realize it until it was too late. It was... a really awful experience." I shivered at the memory.

"Then how come you weren't affected by their blood a while ago?" Milton asked.

"I made sure to attack from afar, or at least keep a safe distance."

Next comes Jun, who is the Ele-nder of the group.

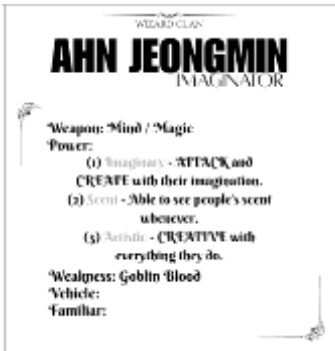
Ele-nder is an abbreviation for Element Bender. The person who possesses that power has the ability to use all of the elements. They can use Ice when all the elements are combined, including Fire, Water, Earth, and Air.



When the members realized what that meant, they freaked out and declared Jun to be the future Avatar of this realm. Jun was surprised by the unexpected nickname and laughed along with the others. However, his weakness was particularly dangerous and hard to avoid. The only advice I could offer was for him to keep his entire body covered, gloves on his hands and a scarf over his face, for the sake of his safety.

Jeongmin comes next, who surprisingly possesses the same power as I have. The Imaginator.

And, as the information box reveals, it helped the lads to understand why Jeongmin's body behaved the way it had before, because he was allergic to the blood of the goblins. The boy must have been negligent



and got squirted with Goblin's blood, causing the tragedy. I suggested that he cover his arm with a cloth or scarf.

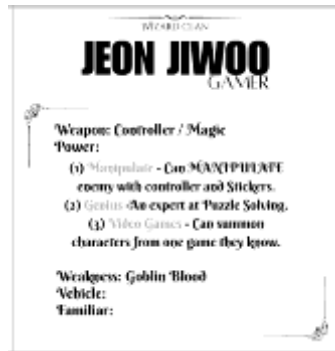
"Rodger... but I don't have anything to cover me up, nor the money to buy one," Jeongmin admitted, hissing in concern.

"Won money isn't worth anything here," Yejoon remarked.

"Don't worry, I'll provide for everything until you have your own money, but make sure you don't spend anything unnecessarily," I reassured him.

Next is Jiwoo. He has the Gamer power.

This is the rarest and strongest of all the powers. Hence the expression of shock on my face. I was speechless. It feels like a blessing from this God's realm to believe that one of the Arkane boys was given such powerful power. Jiwoo, judging by my look, had assumed the power bestowed upon him was useless and was concerned.



"Should I be worried?" Jiwoo asked.

"No! Your power is extremely rare; you may be the only person in this realm who possesses it."

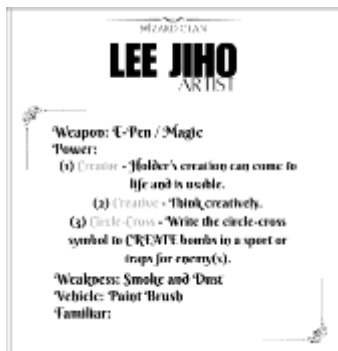
"Does that mean we have to protect Jiwoo hyung?" Jiho asked logically.

He had a point. People from this dimension are known to hunt down those with such uncommon power. Selfish hunters, like those

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rare beasts, would go to any length to capture them, even if it meant breaking the law.

"There is still a chance he will be kidnapped, so we must defend him," I stated, simply to make sure everyone in this realm is safe.



Second to last, Jiho. Who has been given the artist's power.

"Oh wow, I'm amazed that someone as bad at painting as I am, has become an artist in this realm," Jiho laughed. Fortunately for us, another person was granted a vehicle—a cute Paintbrush. But unfortunately, we

have another member with a weakness that is easily infected.

Fabrics are pricey here, and I'm not sure I'll be able to afford them all. I hope Heric and Angela will be kind enough to assist me.

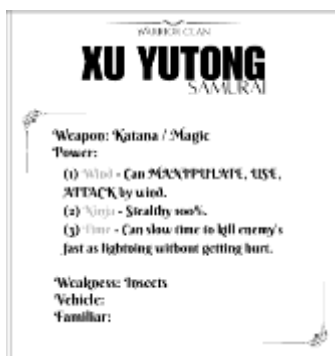
And lastly, Yuto, who is the samurai in the group.

"Well, your costume makes your power evident," Jaeseong stated, referring to the samurai's outfit.

"It looks good, and it's comfortable," Yuto said, twirling to show it off.

"However, it stinks that you're allergic to insects," Milton pointed out.

He was right. These youngsters will need proper protection if we're spending time outside. I'll need to ask Heric and Angela for help. Long sleeves and caution will be essential if they want to avoid serious harm.





Now that we've discovered all of their given abilities, it's time to put them to use. It will be a challenging effort to assist in their training, but I am willing to volunteer to help these lads in their return to the Earth realm.

I then clasped my hands to get their attention. "Tomorrow morning, we'll evaluate your abilities in the fight arena. For now, you boys relax."

"But what about the earth realm? Will time be affected?" Joseph asked.

"We have recordings scheduled for tomorrow," Yejoon explained.

"Don't worry," I reassured them, "time on Earth freezes while you're in this dimension."

"Oh, thank God, that's one less thing to worry about," Seungjae exclaimed, huffing a sigh of relief.

"I'll create more beds for everyone so you can rest, and then we'll continue our adventure tomorrow," I added. Everyone nodded as they listened to what I had to say. For a moment, I felt like a leader. But knowing it's my responsibility to keep these boys safe, I must stay focused and act accordingly. I'm not sure why the G.A.M.E.S. Master brought these idols into the game, but whatever the reason, I'm determined to protect them.

S

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT: YUTO VS YUMI

IT was a lovely morning in the G.A.M.E.S. realm, and I was the first to rise. I made our breakfast first thing in the morning while waiting for Heric to arrive, who had agreed to help the boys after I explained their situation. As for Angela, she told me she couldn't assist for a few days since she had just taken on her new role as manager, which I completely understood.

I made a feast for the boys before heading to the practice dome. It's the least I can do to keep them safe and healthy. About ten minutes later, the boys wandered sleepily into the living room as I placed the dishes on the table, still wearing my apron.

"Oh, good morning!" I greeted.

"Good morning," Jiwoo replied, his voice low and husky.

The boys still look drowsy, trying to adjust to the reality that they weren't in their Seoul apartment but in an entirely different world. It all still felt surreal, and they were still getting used to it.

At the dining table, Jaeseong was the first to approach. He looked over the meal with delight. "Did you make all of these?" he asked, his tone thrilled at my effort.

"Yes, I did," I said, a little nervous. "I hope you don't mind having Japanese breakfast. I wasn't taught anything else."

I worried they might be tired of my country's cuisine, but their excited smiles as they saw the dishes prepared reassured me. Minjoon was the only one who seemed concerned as I scanned their faces, so I quickly added, "Don't worry, Minjoon, no seafood was put in," remembering his allergy.

"Are you sure?" he asked playfully, squinting in doubt.

"If you don't trust me, you can check with your power; I don't mind," I reassured him.

However, he was unsure how to use his abilities. So, I advised him to recite the powers' names or make his intentions clear by mentally envisioning the power he wants to use. With a bit of effort, he activated his vision power and inspected the food I had prepared. To his relief, there was no seafood, only a burger patty made from broccoli instead of beef. Amazed, he smiled at what he had just discovered.

When he shared the results with the others, telling them about the broccoli burger, they laughed in disbelief until I confirmed it. They were stunned. His power was more useful than they expected, and it could very well save his life during our adventure.

Once the chatter died down, the boys eagerly sat to eat breakfast. I worried they might not enjoy the broccoli patties, but they cleared every plate. Midway through the meal, the doorbell rang. I hurried to answer it, while the boys looked at each other curiously. Standing at the door was Heric, smiling warmly. As promised, he had come to help me train the boys before their first mission.

"Hey, you arrived just in time; the boys had just begun eating," I said.

"I can tell by the smell..." He sniffed the air, taking in the wonderful aroma of spices. "... *Wow*, that smells amazing!"

"Would you like some?" I asked as we walked into the living room.

"What did you make?"

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"A burger patty, potato croquette, and rice."

"Ooh, nice! Sounds delicious! Can I have—" His words cut off as his attention landed on the boys. The sight of thirteen of them left him frozen in shock. "...some," he finished faintly.

I didn't notice his reaction at first and continued toward the kitchen counter, grabbing a plate. "Which sauce do you prefer, ketchup or hot sauce—" Before I could finish, Heric grabbed my arm and quickly pulled me into my bedroom, shutting the door behind us.

He looked panicked, breathing heavily as his eyes darted around nervously. It made me concerned as to how he was reacting. I knew he wasn't excellent at meeting new people, but I didn't realize it was this bad.

"Are you alright?" I asked gently.

"You didn't tell me there were 13 of them!" He hissed, voice low but in panic.

"Did I not?"

"No! And you never bothered to tell me they're all attractive!" he grumbled.

"You're just as attractive as they are!" I said without hesitation.

His rushed movements paused, and then he looked back at me in disbelief at what I said. "I am...?"

"Yeah," I nodded firmly.

"Oh..." His posture softened as the words sank in. Though he tried to play it off, the compliment left him flustered, unsure how to respond. "Thank you." Yet even though my words had somehow increased his confidence, I could still sense his unease.

"If training those boys feels like too much, I can coach them myself." I offered, my tone soft. I didn't want to force him to do something he was scared to do. But immediately, Heric shook his head in response,

insisting on joining me. He admitted that he wanted to run, but he also wanted to face his shyness and improve his ability to talk with others. Instead of retreating to old habits, he wanted to use this as a chance to work on his social skills.

I couldn't help but feel proud of him.

Heric had always struggled with social anxiety, and even opening up to Angela and me had taken time. Facing thirteen strangers would be a huge challenge, but progress didn't have to be rushed. I reminded him to take things slowly and promised to step in if he felt overwhelmed. He agreed, and together, we prepared to return to the boys.



We're now heading to the Practice Dome to train the boys. The goal was to give them a chance to explore their abilities and learn how to control them. Once they understood their powers, we will quickly register them with the Adventurers Guild and take on a mission. I wouldn't want to have these boys around for much longer. The Earth is a much safer place to be in comparison to this realm.

To get there, we had to pass through Houndlet Town, which instantly captivated the boys. Hearing them gasp in awe and point out items they found interesting reminded me of my first day in this universe. Everything felt strange, and you could sense the magic flowing through the streets. The attire the individuals wore was like stepping back into the Medieval Ages, only in a land of fantasy.

All of the women wore gowns with two or three layers of clothing, while the men wore either a plain shirt and slacks or a brown tunic. The streets are lined with shops selling fruits, vegetables, food, and sweets, as well as a bakery, a boutique, a weapon and armor store, and countless other curiosities.

After only a short walk, we have reached our destination.

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It was enormous, almost like an arena built for grand performances. But here, the only thing you'll be performing were battles.

"And here we are!" I announced.

"Welcome to the Practice Dome!" Heric exclaimed, doing his best not to stutter. Seeing his progress made me proud! Even though he appeared confident, his quick glance away with a forced smile gave away his nerves.

The boys didn't see Heric's nervous gestures because they were too captivated by the sight before them. The dome within was as large as they expected, but the vastness of this place still astounded them. Yet not everyone felt the same way; some were uneasy, creating fear in their hearts.

Before we began, I explained how training would work. I'll test them against sand dummies clad in metal armor designed by yours truly. Their task was simple: defend themselves using their powers, or, even better, destroy the dummies entirely.

I told them to regard these dummies as their adversaries and to not be afraid to unleash their strongest attacks without hesitation. When I finished, I turned to Heric. He had been listening intently, and as soon as he realized I was giving him the floor, he seized the moment.

"All right! W-who wants to go first?" he asked, his voice slightly unsteady.

The boys exchanged uneasy looks, waiting for someone to volunteer. They've never battled physically before, let alone using magic, and the thought of getting hurt or failing in front of each other weighed heavily on them.

After a tense pause, Yuto finally raised his hand. "I'll go first," he said, then glanced at his members with a reassuring smile. "If you don't mind."

"The floor is all yours, my friend!" Seongho responded, politely extending his arms and pointing towards the battlefield. With that, the practice battle between Yuto and the dolls has begun!

I handed Heric a copy of their powers and clan affiliations to give him a sense of what he and I would be dealing with. While he was scanning the documents, I prepared the dummies using the sand on the ground. Using my power to convert those small grains of sand into human-like, faceless knights clad in metal armor.

The boys stiffened at the sight. The blank faces of the knights gave off an unsettling presence.

"Will we just fight them like that?" Jaeseong asked nervously.

"Of course not! That would be too easy?" I remarked as I once more utilized my abilities to bring those knight dummies to life.

The moment the dummies were able to move, the boys flinched. The atmosphere grew heavier, the knights radiating an even more threatening aura.

Jaeseong was taken aback when he saw that I could bring these dummies to life. According to what he remembered from my information box, neither of us had the same powers that allowed us to be the same.

"Y-you can manipulate dolls as well?" he inquired, "but you're not a clown."

"I'm the Imaginator." I explained calmly, "I can attack by imagining what I want, including manipulating dolls; all I have to do is envision bringing them to life, and they'll move the way I want them to."

The revelation left the group stunned, especially Jeongmin, who was also an Imaginator. He had no idea the power bestowed upon him was so potent.

"Let's get started!" I declared.

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Yuto's expression hardened with determination, and when I saw his expression, I couldn't help but feel fired up; I was eager to see this match unfold.

As soon as I commanded the knights to attack, he chanted, "*Time.*"

Instantly, the battlefield shifted. His spell slowed everything around him, stretching each movement into clear detail. With the world dragging in slow motion, Yuto struck with precision. To everyone's astonishment, he destroyed all three knights in a single second.

The dome fell silent, wide-eyed with shock—even I was amazed. Heric was the only person who smiled faintly and clapped in approval, expecting that this 'TIME' spell would be the power he would be using for this practice battle.

Seungjae noticed his calm reaction and was baffled as to why he wasn't as horrified as the others. Heric didn't want to be impolite, so he explained while struggling to hold eye contact. "I'm a samurai. I've used that power a lot. It's...incredibly useful." He said.



JUN, JOSEPH, JAESEONG, MILTON VS YUMI

JUN stepped up next, and during his duel, he opted to toy with his opponent's shadow while sneaking behind them, utilizing his teleportation power.

He steps on the knight's shadow and swipes, forcing the knight to fall over every time he sneaks up behind him. He intended to use this strategy with the other two knights, but I was aware of his plans, and the moment he tried again, I struck first, trapping him inside a water bubble.

Jun froze, eyes wide in shock. He hadn't expected me to intervene, assuming the knights were his only opponents. I simply smiled, giving him a playful wave.

"Better luck next time!" I teased.

He pouted, disappointed with the outcome of his training. He was dead set on winning. Just when he thought everything was over, something clicked. Realizing the bubble was made of water, Jun shifted tactics.

With sudden focus, he froze the bubble into ice. My jaw nearly dropped. Elementers weren't supposed to wield ice so easily; combining the four elements required immense concentration and power. Before I could recover from my surprise, Jun ignited flames to melt the ice, shattering my trap. Seizing his chance, he unleashed a powerful gust of

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wind, blasting the last two knights across the battlefield, winning the battle.

But as the adrenaline wore off, Jun's legs buckled. He dropped to his knees, clutching his chest as his heart pounded. "I thought that was the end of me! Oh my God, that was terrifying!" he gasped, crawling back toward his friends. They welcomed him with cheers, hugs, and pats on the back, celebrating his hard-fought win.



Joseph, our zoologist, was up next. I'm curious how he'll attack, given that his abilities were tied solely to animals.

He stepped forward cautiously, eyes darting between the three armored knights I'd prepared for him. His low self-esteem made him hesitate, but survival in this realm demanded courage. He needed both a defense and an attack.

Because I can communicate with animals, I can also summon them... right? He thought. Taking a shaky breath, he whispered to himself, "Okay, be calm. I can do this. You can do this."

He attempted to relax, but the uneasiness inside him grew, and it grew even more when I launched the first attack. He quickly dodged, diving to his right. He was terrified by the encounter, but he couldn't stay down. The knight gave him no chance to recover, its massive axe already swinging down toward him.

Joseph rolled just in time, then scrambled to his feet and sprinted away, dodging one attack after another until exhaustion slowed him down. Heric watched Joseph struggling and felt compelled to assist him. And he did just that!

"Sir Joseph! Try calling an animal to aid you!" he exclaimed.

Clinging to that advice, Joseph cried out desperately, calling for help from any creature—birds, rodents, insects, *anything*. For a moment, it

seemed hopeless. Then, to everyone's shock, a massive black bear lumbered into the dome.

Gasps filled the room. Joseph ran straight to the beast, pleading, "Please, help me!" The bear rumbled low in its throat, making him flinch. "No, don't be like that, I really need your help!"

The bear then spoke again, and with its terrifying strength, it tore into the dummies, smashing and ripping them apart until nothing remained standing. Joseph collapsed to his knees, relief washing over him as he exhaled a shaky breath. He praised the bear for its bravery, and the creature huffed, requesting a pat on the head as a treat, which Joseph gladly granted.

Generally, all bears are hazardous. But here, where Joseph could speak to and bond with animals, even such a beast became a powerful ally and was not so frightening after all.



Next up was Jaeseong, our clown. He stepped onto the field with a mischievous grin, ready for his turn.

"Start," Heric announced.

"Illusion," he whispered, and in an instant, five copies of himself appeared in front of them. The sudden multiplication drew gasps from the others. The knights charged, their heavy weapons swinging. The false Jaeseongs were struck down one by one, but the real Jaeseong easily slipped out of reach, darting around them with agile footwork. And when he was the only one left standing, they dashed after him, but the clown merely smirked.

With one tug of an unseen cord, the knights were pulled together, tied, and unable to flee. To my surprise, Jaeseong had secretly been using his string power while dodging their attacks, and I hadn't noticed a thing. He had crafted the threads so thin they were nearly invisible,

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weaving them around the knights as he moved. Then, with one final pull, he tightened the strings until the pressure grew unbearable. The armored dummies compressed violently before bursting apart into sand, all three defeated in an instant.



Milton, our hunter, comes next. His bow and arrows are the only weapons he has. So, it'll be intriguing to see what he can do with that alone.

He cautiously gripped his weapon as he readied it. Milton had never used these before, which made him even more anxious, and all he could tell himself was not to make a mistake. He aimed at the knight and let go when he felt he had it precisely aligned. The arrow was aimed at one of them, but it was easily deflected by its armor.

Heric saw how challenging this training was for Milton, who had nothing but a bow and arrows to rely on. Wanting to help, he suggested a different approach to develop Milton's skills.

"How about we try a different kind of training to strengthen his archery skills?" he proposed. Heric's ideas never cease to amaze me; he always comes up with such brilliant ones.

Milton grew even more nervous at the suggestion, though he was eager to try. It was his first time handling a bow and arrow, and the weight of expectation pressed on him. To prepare, I molded the sand on the ground into knight-shaped dummies for him to use as targets. These dummies will remain motionless for the first round. They will, however, move for the second round.

"Are you prepared, Sir Milton?" Heric inquired.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Good luck!" I said, stomping the ground to summon the first row of dummies.

He began by aiming carefully at the knights in front of him before releasing his first shot. One by one, his arrows struck their targets with surprising accuracy. For someone holding a bow for the very first time, Milton moved with the precision of someone well-practiced, each shot landing cleanly. He hadn't expected to be this skilled, but the result left him pleasantly surprised. The moment he cleared the first round; I gave him no time to rest. With another stomp of my foot, the ground shifted, and more clay knights emerged—this time, in motion.

"Wait—!"

Milton wasn't quite prepared for the second round. His targets had become significantly more difficult to hit. For a moment, he thought finishing this round would be impossible with them running around. Still, he refused to give up, narrowing his focus on the moving knights.

Just as he steadied his aim, one knight lunged at him, sword flashing. Startled, Milton stumbled back to evade the strike. Before he could recover, another knight appeared behind him, blade raised, and slashed down, coating him with poison.

I smirked, convinced the poison had secured my victory, until I realized Milton remained completely unaffected. That's when I remembered Milton was neutral to poison! Instead of panicking, Milton steadied himself, channeling his power as it coursed through his body.

With calm determination, he closed his eyes, drew his bow, and released. An arrow struck its mark. Then another. And another. Finally, with a precise, triple shot, his last arrow pierced straight through the knight's forehead.

The room erupted in applause. I had to admit—his performance was far more impressive than I expected.

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JIHO, SUJIN, SEUNGJAE, VS YUMI

THE next member is Jiho, our artist. He previously stated that he was not an artist or particularly talented in the visual arts. I'm interested to see how he fights now that he was granted the power to draw in order to attack.

As soon as the battle began, he sprinted around the arena, darting back and forth in an attempt to throw me and the knights off balance. I stayed focused, refusing to let his movements distract me. What I didn't notice, however, was that he had quietly drawn a circle-cross symbol beneath the knights' feet. He then came to a halt, panting heavily in exhaustion from the short workout.

I seized the opportunity and sent the knights charging toward him while he was distracted, but this was all part of his plan. When I caught the sly grin on his face, I realized too late I had walked into his trap. The ground beneath the knights erupted in a sudden explosion, blasting their armored bodies into pieces and scattering debris across the battlefield.



Chef Minjoon is up next, and as he proceeded to the middle, he wore an expression that suggested he was unsure about something.

"I'm not sure how I'll use this power...or if it will ever work," Minjoon said.

"Just do whatever you believe is best," I encouraged.

"All right, then."

With that, Minjoon's training began. I directed the knights charging toward the youngster as he extended his open palm in their direction. At first, I had no clue what he intended to do. But then he began to chant, and in that moment, I realized how much I had underestimated his power.

He chanted, "*Gluttony*." In an instant, a powerful gust erupted from his palm, pulling the three knights into a vortex. With a swift motion, he clenched his fist and sealed it with a kiss, ending the battle in mere seconds.

"Finished already?" Milton asked, wide-eyed. He hadn't expected such a quick victory. I inhaled, my lips pursed in disbelief, before finally admitting, "I'm sorry for underestimating you."

Heric chuckled and added, "Lesson of the day: never underestimate anyone, no matter their clan."



Sujin is up next! I expected him to be nervous, but he looked genuinely excited for his turn. Known for being a timid and easily scared member of Arkane, his expression caught us off guard.

"You seem excited," Seungjae remarked.

"That's new! You're usually terrified in these situations," Jaeseong added.

Sujin gave a small smile. "Honestly, I'm just trying hard not to let fear take over. If I don't stay positive, I'll probably end up getting hurt."

When the combat began, Sujin began to use his vocal power. I knew it was one of his abilities, but when he sang, his wonderful voice took

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me by surprise. The moment he began to sing, his voice stopped me in my tracks—rich, captivating, and almost enchanting. The melody carried through the dome, and for a moment, I was frozen in place, completely mesmerized by his song.

"Oh, it's working!" exclaimed Jiwoo. Sujin noticed how his singing seemed to make me drowsy, and, thinking his power was working, he kept going. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough. After a brief pause, I directed the knights to advance slightly. The moment Sujin saw the dummies begin to move, his voice faltered, cracking with fear.

"Or not..."

But the young man did not give up and continued to sing. Yet no matter how hard he tried, nothing worked. Fun Fact: As an Imaginator, I may neutralize any singing or hypnotic attacks. That's why I could still move freely and command the dummies.

When he realized his power wasn't working, the boy gave up. His once-beautiful melodic vocals broke down into desperate shouting as he tried to ward off the knights.

"Don't get any closer! I dare you!" He cried.

"Sujin, just attack them!" Joseph urged.

But despite the advice, Sujin was too afraid to fight back. His body refused to respond the way he wanted, leaving him no choice but to stumble backward as the knights closed on him.

"STAY BACK!" he screamed, thrusting his palm forward. Crimson fireballs erupted from his hand, colliding with the knights and setting them ablaze. Relief washed over him as a wide grin spread across his face until I doused the flames with water. His smile vanished, replaced by a terrified grimace.

"Oh no..." he whispered.

"Knights, charge!" I commanded with authority.

At once, Sujin's confidence crumbled. Instead of fighting back, he cowered, covering his head as the armored dummies advanced. Convinced this was the end for him, he froze. But before the knights could strike, Seungjae rushed forward, hurling a blue fireball that froze one of them in its tracks.

"Don't even think about injuring him!" shouted Seungjae. Hearing his partner's voice, Sujin slowly raised his head. His eyes were wet, his nose red from crying, but in that moment, he realized he wasn't alone.

"Seungjae-ah!" Sujin cried.

"This is something I never expected from him," Milton remarked, and the other members nodded in agreement. After all, if Sujin ranked second in the group's "scaredy-cat" category, Seungjae undoubtedly held first place.

While the members whispered among themselves, Seungjae helped Sujin back to his feet, and the two agreed to partner up for the remainder of the training. It's as though these two have grown even more powerful than before, their combined aura shifting, growing stronger, and transforming into something truly phenomenal.

"Alright then, 1 vs 2, I can handle it," I grumbled to myself, and without hesitation, I summoned more knight dummies and directed them all to attack the Songist pair at once.

As the knights advanced, hungry for their flesh, the two stood their ground. Side by side, they raised their hands and, without hesitation, chanted fearlessly,

"BLUE!"

"RED!"

"FIRE SPIRAL!"

The two magicians worked in perfect sync, merging their individual fire powers into something far greater. Seungjae's blue flames

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intertwined with Sujin's red fire, the two forces swirling together in a dazzling storm that burned and froze their opponents at the same time.

Witnessing their combined strength, I raised my hands in surrender. "Well done! Looks like you've defeated me!" Hearing that, relief washed over them. They broke into smiles, laughing breathlessly before embracing each other in pure triumph.



SEONGHO, JEONGMIN, JIWOO, YEJOON VS YUMI

SEONGHO, the Knight, comes next!

"Oh, knight vs. knight!" I exclaimed with delight.

"Well, I'm a little nervous, but come at me!"

"I see you're a competitive fella. I don't hate it."

We each took our defensive stances, waiting for the signal to attack.

The moment the battle began, Seongho ignited his sword with fire.

"Let's see what I've got," he muttered as the knights charged.

Tightening his grip on his blades, he began chanting.

"Slow motion."

A glowing white circle flickered in his left pupil, and instantly, the knights' movements slowed in his sight. Without hesitation, he cut through their bodies one by one, striking with precision. But his fight wasn't over yet. Three more knights appeared behind him, and one immediately swung its blade at his back.

"Behind you!" shouted Yuto.

Seongho spun around and deflected the knights' strike with his sword. The impact forced him back several steps, nearly knocking him off balance, but he steadied himself before falling. With a swift counter, he wrenched the enemy's blade aside and slashed across its torso, finishing it off. In the same motion, he unleashed a burst of fire, engulfing the remaining two knights until they crumbled.

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"Well done!" I exclaimed, pleased by what he demonstrated.

"Am I finished?" Seongho asked, panting.

"Yes," Heric confirmed, "you may rest with the others." And with that, the leader dropped to his knees, completely exhausted, his breath ragged from the battle.



Jeongmin, who has the same power as I have, was up next. I had never fought another Imaginator before, so I felt both apprehensive and eager to see how this would play out. He huffed as he devised a strategy to eliminate the knights, feeling the anxious tension.

'Because my strength is based on imagination, I can just envision what assault I can use to defeat them, right?' he thought to himself. Before he could refine his plan, the match had already begun.

"Begin!" yelled Heric.

The knights charged at Jeongmin, and the sight of these bloodthirsty knights charging at him sent a shiver down his spine. But that wasn't going to stop him now.

'Imagine, imagine, imagine.'

As he attacked, his pupils glowed rainbow hues. The knights lifted into the air, suspended and unable to advance. Impressive, but not enough to stop me.

I instantly released my power from the knights and created an invisible one that he couldn't see. Jeongmin was perplexed as to why I had stopped attacking, but the smirk on my face gave me away; he realized too late that I was launching a hidden attack.

As he tried to concentrate, he felt a surge of tension close in on him. Desperate to locate the threat, he tapped into his secondary ability: scent. At once, faint traces of clay drifted behind him. His eyes widened in realization. The moment he turned, the invisible knight drove a fist

into his stomach, sending him crashing into the air before slamming on-to the ground.

I winced slightly. Maybe I had pushed too hard with that strike. Still, I guess a little pain should be part of the lesson.

As the boys rushed to help him, Jeongmin winced, squinting in pain. He struggled to recover, wanting to heal himself, but there was no time. Suddenly, the knight swung its axe down at him.

Reacting on instinct, he rolled aside and unleashed the first attack that came to mind. "Wind Cut!" he shouted. A sharp current of air slashed through the knight's body, severing its legs and skull in one swift strike.

When the battle ended, I walked over and extended my hand to him. He looked up, still catching his breath, his face tight with exhaustion. "My loss," I admitted simply. That was enough to soften his grimace into a smile, and he let out a small, relieved laugh. Taking my hand, he allowed me to pull him to his feet, and finally, I healed him.



Jiwoo, our gamer, is the next-to-last opponent. Knowing he possessed the rarest power in this realm made me nervous. Nonetheless, I had to play tough in order for him to exercise his power.

As the battle began, my knights charged toward him. Based on how the others had reacted in the same situation, I expected Jiwoo to show some sign of fear or hesitation. Instead, he stood perfectly still, his expression calm and unreadable.

"*Video games*," he chanted, and a glowing board materialized before him, visible only to his eyes.

The man was shocked and excited to see the board emerge in front of him, just like in the games he played. He expected this to be part of his power, but he couldn't believe he was living out his gamer fantasies.

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As he continued to investigate the board, he found it was filled with characters from Superb Smashy Gals, a game he used to play during childhood. He quickly tapped into the Pakémin menu, and within seconds, hundreds of Pakémin creatures filled his screen.

"Holy—I knew Pakémin had a lot of monsters, but I had no idea there were hundreds of them." Jiwoo's eyes widened as he admired the endless lineup on the board. But while he was distracted, the knights saw their chance. They charged in, blades raised. Jiwoo didn't even notice until Jiho shouted in alarm, warning him just in time. Heart racing, he dove to the side, barely avoiding the strike.

"Shoot—I should start attacking," he grumbled under his breath. Quickly, he scrolled through the board, frantically selecting the first Pakémin he could find. Then, as his eyes flicked upward, he froze—recognizing a familiar face among the endless options.

"Let's go, Pikechi," he whispered, summoning the creature behind him. Its sudden appearance left everyone stunned.

"What the—is that Pikechi?" Sujin blurted out in disbelief.

"Hyung can summon Pakémin?" Seungjae gasped.

"Pikechi, use Lightning Strike!" Jiwoo commanded. Without hesitation, the tiny creature unleashed its legendary electric attack, striking the knights with blinding force. For a moment, it felt like everything slowed down. Pikechi, the legendary Pakémin, was standing in front of me! The same Pikechi I used to adore as a kid, now alive, using its iconic move.

No matter how hard I try to stay professional around these boys, if you pull something straight out of my favorite childhood fable, all composure goes out the window.

"I'm giving in! Can I pet Pikechi?" I begged, pouting like a child.

"What—Yumi! Focus!" Heric snapped, clearly exasperated. You can easily tell which of us was the easily distracted friend.

"With his ability to summon characters from video games, he's basically unbeatable," I argued.

"You never know!" Heric shrugged.

I sighed and turned to Jiwoo, asking, "What game can you summon from?"

"Superb Smashy Gals," he answered casually.

My eyes flew wide as I whipped back toward Heric. "See! That game combines like 30 other games—he's invincible!"

"All right, fine," Heric muttered.

I turned right back to Jiwoo. "Can I now pet Pikechi?" I asked again, and he chuckled at my eagerness.

"Sure," he said, shrugging.

Carefully, I reached out, and Pikechi leaned closer to me. My heart nearly burst. It was like a dream come true! The Pikechi I had adored and longed to pet for years was *right here*. His fur was impossibly soft, like silk. I couldn't resist pressing my cheek into his warm belly, savoring the velvety softness without a second thought. The people who witnessed my strange obsession were taken aback.

"W-what are you doing, Yumi?" Heric shouted, struggling to separate the creature from me.



Minutes later, we reached our final opponent. Our musician, Yejoon.

"All right, let's wrap this up quickly," Yejoon sighed.

"Wow, confident, aren't we?" I teased.

"All I want to do is go home to the real world and rest."

"Fair enough."

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I stomped my foot, summoning more clay knights. But instead of panicking, Yejoon calmly extended his hand as though calling forth something. I ignored it and sent the knights forward.

"Engineer!" he yelled, and to everyone's shock, a massive clay machine gun rose from the ground. He gripped the M16-style weapon, aiming it at the knights—and at me. My eyes widened in horror.

"Wait—!"

Before I could finish, Yejoon opened fire. The deafening rattle of bullets filled the air. Reacting on instinct, I conjured a towering wall of clay, shielding Heric, the others, and myself.

We were all terrified by the sound of the machine roaring relentlessly as it shot everywhere, and because of its massive construction, the bullet was extremely difficult to stop. But if I faltered for even a moment, the bullets would tear through and strike us all.

To keep the boys from sharing the same fate I once did, I held my power steady until Yejoon finally ended his attack. After what felt like hours, he released a heavy breath and let go of the weapon, the massive gun crumbling back into clay. One by one, the others cautiously stepped out from behind the wall, checking to see if the battle was truly over.

"You could have killed us!" I shouted.

Realizing the damage he had caused—to the dome, the bullet-pocked floors and walls, and to us—Yejoon quickly apologized, guilt flashing across his face at the sight of his shaken teammates.

Even though Yejoon's actions brought us closer to death, I couldn't deny what I'd seen. These boys are ready for their mission. The world outside Houndlet Kingdom's borders will be dangerous, but if we work together, I know we can protect them. And seeing the strength they've

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shown today, I finally feel a sense of relief—I don't have to carry that worry alone.

Missions, here we come!

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END OF PREVIEW

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author, Teresa, also known as Rosequarts C., was born in 2001. Although she graduated with a degree in studio art, her love for storytelling began early. During her junior high years, she decided she wanted to write her own stories, starting with lighthearted fanfictions created just for fun, most of which remained unfinished. It wasn't until the end of her junior high years that she began her first serious fanfiction project.

Inspired by stories she discovered on YouTube, Teresa eventually created her own channel dedicated to sharing her written works. She continues to create and post her stories, not minding the size of her audience but rather hoping to reach the right readers who will appreciate her imagination. Her goal is to bring joy and inspiration to her readers, the same joy she feels when bringing her characters to life.

Writing isn't her only passion. Teresa also enjoys gaming, cooking, dancing, singing, and crafting jewelry with clay and resin, creative outlets that help her unwind and fill her life with happiness.