

Chapter 1834.

Upon feeling Gerald's aura, the man in the cloak was startled. He didn't expect that Gerald would use his aura to fight against his own aura. Moreover, his aura was not weak at all, showing that Gerald was not an ordinary person.

However, the other people in the surrounding area were almost out of breath because of their strong auras.

The auras of these two men were far too strong.

"You are very special!"

Finally, the man in the cloak withdrew his aura and said to Gerald with an interested expression.

"Heh. It's nothing."

Gerald replied calmly with an indifferent look on his face.

"What exactly is your purpose for coming here?"

The man in the cloak continued to question Gerald.

"Would you believe me if I told you we are just here for a vacation?"

Gerald countered the man in the cloak's question without showing any inferiority.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Hearing Gerald's words, the man in the cloak burst into laughter.

"Vacation? Do you really think that I'm a three-year-old kid? Do you honestly think I can't see what's special about you guys? You must be here for the Phangrottom Clan."

The man in the cloak snorted at once and directly stated the purpose Gerald and the other three had come for.

Having said that, the man in the cloak raised his hand and snapped his finger.

Immediately, the purple soul hunter came in, carrying a book and a map in his hands.

The purple soul hunter handed the two things to the man in the cloak.

Seeing this, the faces of Gerald and the others became grave. They knew that their secret couldn't be hidden anymore. They had been completely discovered.

"Why? Are you still planning to act dumb in front of me? You are surely here for the Phangrottom Clan!"

The man in the cloak stared at Gerald coldly and said.

“Since you have found out about it, we don’t have anything else to say. So, what do you want?”

Gerald did not try to hide it any longer, and he questioned the man in the cloak straightforwardly.

Frankly speaking, this one organization was not a problem for Gerald at all. He could easily kill them all. However, Gerald had to take Rey and Yrsa into account, and that was why he hadn’t made a move.

“I know you can read this map. I hope you can cooperate with us to search for the Phangrottom Clan. That way, I will spare your lives. This is a good bargain!”

The man in the cloak proposed his idea directly toward Gerald.

“What if I don’t agree to it?”

Gerald replied indifferently.

“You don’t agree? Hah! Do you think you have any room to bargain with me?”

The man in the cloak sneered.

As soon as he said that, a few soul hunters came in, aiming their crossbows at Gerald and his friends.

Gerald knew that the man in the cloak was trying to pressure him forcefully.

“Alright. I can work with you. However, you can’t have any thoughts about us, and you must return all of our things to us.”

After a pause, Gerald agreed and told him his condition.

“Sure, no problem. As long as you cooperate with us, we won’t do anything to you guys!”

The man in the cloak agreed to it promptly.

Soon after, the man in the cloak returned their belongings to the four of them.

In truth, the most important thing was still Gerald’s map.

The map that Master Snyder had given to Gerald was the key to finding the entrance of the path to the Phangrottom Clan. More importantly, Gerald was the only one who could decipher the map.

After packing up, Gerald and his friends departed with a dozen soul hunters.

“Brother Gerald, what should we do now? Are we really bringing them to the Phangrottom Clan?” On the way, Rey whispered to Gerald.

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“Don’t worry. We’ll see how it goes. You guys try to find an opportunity to escape first. Leave them to me!”

Gerald looked at Juno and the other two as he reminded them.

They nodded.

“Gerald, the leader of the soul hunters is not weak. You must be careful.”

Juno reminded Gerald once more.

Gerald was well aware. Judging from the previous duel between him and the man, Gerald knew that the power of that man was not weak. He was a problem, but it did not mean that Gerald was not his match.

“Yes. Don’t worry. I’ll be careful!”

Gerald looked at Juno and nodded.

The man in the cloak was coming for the Phangrottom Clan. So, Gerald would certainly not let him get what he wanted so easily, much less allow them to gain the ability to control ghosts.

Soon, they arrived at the edge of a canyon.

There was only one wooden bridge in the canyon, and the structure looked very shaky. Just by looking at it, you would know that it was not safe.

However, Gerald and the rest had no way back. This was the only path to enter the most feminine place. It was a path they had to take no matter what.

Gerald and the three others stood near the bridge and looked across the mountain peaks.

“The distance between the canyon must be at least a hundred meters wide, and it’s windy. It’s not going to be easy!”

Gerald blurted out.

“What’s wrong, Gerald? What are you worried about?”

When Juno heard him, she immediately asked Gerald in confusion.

“This wooden bridge is not that easy to cross.”

Gerald said firmly with a serious face.

Right then, the man in the cloak and a few soul hunters walked toward them.

“Why did you stop?”

The man in the cloak stared at them and asked.

“The bridge is not easy to cross. If we get on the bridge hastily, it might be dangerous!”

Gerald looked at him and said.

“Huh! Stop all your crap! I don’t care if it’s dangerous or not. I’m sure you have a way to cross the bridge.”

The man in the cloak didn’t bother at all and replied with a sneer.

Hearing his words, Gerald knew he didn’t have a choice.

“Alright, then. We’ll go first, and you follow us carefully!”

Gerald told them indifferently.

Having said that, Gerald took one step forward.

But before Gerald could move forward, the man in the cloak stopped him.

“What is it?”

When the man stopped Gerald, Gerald frowned and asked coldly.

“You can’t go ahead of us. Who knows if you will play dirty tricks?” said the man in the cloak.

When Gerald heard his words, he was irritated. He had an urge to finish off the man in the cloak and the soul hunters all at once.

If it was not because of their numbers, Gerald wouldn't have compromised.

"Okay, okay. In that case, let your men go first, and we will walk in the middle!"

Gerald said helplessly and made an inviting hand gesture.

Seeing Gerald's attitude, the man in the cloak was very satisfied. Then, he immediately signaled a few purple soul hunters behind him.

The purple soul hunters understood it right away and got on the bridge, leading the group.

As for Gerald and the other three, they followed closely behind the purple soul hunters. The man in the cloak and the rest of his men followed behind Gerald, completely surrounding Gerald and his friends in the middle.

As they walked on the wooden bridge, Gerald felt more and more uneasy. He had an ominous feeling that the wooden bridge was not as simple as it looked.

The most feminine place was definitely not that easy to find. With only one wooden bridge between the canyon, didn't it seem way too easy?

"Gerald, why do you look so sick?"

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Juno noticed Gerald's expression and asked him in concern.

"I'm just worried that it might not be this easy to cross the bridge. I have an ominous feeling!"

Gerald explained with a serious face.

When Juno heard him, she looked around but did not see anything unusual.

"Are you just being too careful?"

Juno asked suspiciously.

Gerald shook his head in denial.

"It's not possible. I'm not merely being careful. I simply have this gut feeling!"

Boom!

As soon as Gerald said that, a loud explosion rang in the entire canyon.

The crowd immediately looked to the left side of the canyon, as the sound came from that direction.

The whole canyon was so dark that they couldn't see the situation clearly. Besides, the sky was also turning dark with black clouds forming in the sky. This was certainly not a good sign.

The next second, something happened that stunned everyone.

A swarm of black insects flew out from the left side of the canyon and rushed directly toward them.

“What's that?”

Someone asked in surprise.

However, nobody knew what that was. They only knew that it was not a good thing.

“Let's go! Quick!”

Gerald reacted quickly and told the three behind him.

Having said that, Gerald and the three ran forward at top speed.

However, it was not as simple as it seemed. The few purple soul hunters in front of them had suddenly been crushed to death by falling stones from the mountains, and those stones blocked their way directly.

“D*mn it! Brother Gerald, the path is blocked. What should we do now?”

Seeing this, Rey asked Gerald in shock.

At the moment, both ends of the path were blocked by the stones, and Gerald and the rest had nowhere else to go.

Not only that, but they also had to face the swarm of flying insects.

Gerald turned around and looked behind him.

The soul hunters were already taking out their crossbows to attack the insects.

However, how could their crossbows possibly deal with the insects? They were simply wasting their energy.

“Argh!”

Following that, cries of misery and screams were heard.

The screams rang through the entire canyon.

A few soul hunters were surrounded by the insects, and in just a few minutes, they had already turned into piles of bones.

Seeing this, everyone was shocked.

“Rey, take out the clothes in your bag!”

Rey suddenly thought of something and instructed Rey, who was behind him, immediately.

Rey reacted swiftly and took out a piece of clothing, giving it to Gerald.

Then, Gerald took out a lighter from his pocket and set the clothes on fire.

All insects were afraid of fire. That was why Gerald had done this.

“Follow me!”

Gerald said to Rey and the girls.

Then, Gerald and the other three marched forward. Gerald kept waving the burning clothes in his hand as he led the way.

As expected, it worked, and the insects didn't dare to get near the four of them and went for the soul hunters instead.

When the man in the cloak saw Gerald's actions, he reacted swiftly and ordered his men to light a torch or some clothes.

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Chapter 1837

Snap!

A crisp breaking sound was heard, and the wooden bridge broke mercilessly!

In an instant, everyone fell into the deep abyss of the canyon.

Shouts, screams, and shrieks were heard in the canyon. The sound echoed in the canyon for a long time before dissipating completely.

At that moment, Gerald and his friends fell directly into the river of the canyon together.

Luckily, the bottom of the canyon was not the ground, but a river. Otherwise, they would have already fallen to their deaths.

Nevertheless, the water of this river was bone-chilling.

Gerald quickly located Juno and the others and got them to the riverside one by one.

Rey was completely unconscious. He seemed to have fainted out of fear.

After a difficult swim, Gerald, Juno, and Yrsa finally managed to drag Rey to the riverbank.

The four lay on the riverbank.

After catching his breath, Gerald immediately reacted.

“Quick! We shouldn’t be resting here. We must leave this place now and find somewhere to make a fire to warm our bodies!”

Gerald reminded Juno and Yrsa.

The water of the river was bone-chilling, so their body temperature would drop drastically. If they delayed it any further, they would get hypothermia, and when that happened, they would truly be in big trouble.

Having said that, Gerald lifted Rey up and left the riverbank with Juno and Yrsa.

The four came to an open area, and Gerald put Rey down.

“You guys wait for me here. I’ll go get some firewood!”

Gerald instructed them and walked into the forest quickly.

Gerald came back after a short while with some firewood.

Then, he made a fire.

“Take off your clothes. We’ll dry the clothes first. We will catch a cold if we keep wearing them!”

Gerald said to Juno and Yrsa.

Juno and Yrsa didn't disagree. They couldn't afford to care so much now. It was more important to stay alive. They wouldn't care if it was embarrassing or not now.

Following Gerald's instruction, the four took off their clothes and dried them by the fire.

Meanwhile, Gerald took out two pieces of clothes from Rey's bag and handed them to Juno and Yrsa.

After all, they were girls. He should take good care of them.

Coincidentally, Gerald felt that Yrsa's body shape was not any worse than Juno's.

But now, Gerald was not in the mood to care about that.

After about half an hour, their clothes were finally dry, so they put them back on.

"What's wrong with Rey?"

Yrsa glanced at Rey and asked Gerald.

"He probably just fainted due to fear. He'll be fine!"

Gerald explained briefly.

Gerald had checked Rey's heartbeat and pulse just now and determined that everything was normal. So, this must mean that he had simply fainted out of fear.

Hearing Gerald's answer, Juno and Yrsa were relieved.

"Gerald, you were right. There really was a problem with the wooden bridge!"

As they were sitting together quietly, Juno said to Gerald with lingering fear.

"It felt strange right from the beginning. Think about it. The most feminine place should not be this easy to find. How could there be a wooden bridge that was so easy to cross in between the canyons?"

Gerald said to the girls.

"Anyway, what the hell were those things just now?! They're so scary!"

Yrsa asked. Her heart was still racing in fear.

Gerald and Juno shook their heads simultaneously. They did not know as well.

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Chapter 1838

"I don't know. Regardless, those insects are surely not that simple. They eat humans. Look how the soul hunters were eaten and turned into white bones in seconds!"

Gerald said in retrospect.

Now that Gerald mentioned it, Juno and the other two got goosebumps instantly.

It couldn't be denied that what they had witnessed just now was indeed very horrifying.

A living human had been turned into a pile of white bones. It was utterly horrific.

Thankfully, they were finally out of danger.

Right then, Rey regained consciousness.

"Rey, you're awake."

Seeing Rey awaken, Gerald looked at him and said.

"Brother Gerald, Miss Zorn, I... Are we dead?"

Rey asked in confusion, looking at Gerald and Juno.

Slap!

When Gerald heard that, he slapped Rey at the back of his head, feeling rather annoyed.

“What the hell are you talking about?! We’re all alive and well! Come to your senses already!”

Gerald glared at Rey and uttered word by word.

From that, Rey had completely sobered up.

“That’s great, Brother Gerald! We’re fine now. That’s so wonderful!”

Once he had come to his senses and knew that he was fine, Rey hugged Gerald tightly as he shouted in excitement.

He had been scared to death as he was falling from such a high place. That was why he had passed out, thinking he was going to die just like that. But now that he knew he was fine, he was overjoyed.

“Can you be more like an adult already? Why are you acting like a little girl when you are actually a grown man? You’re not even as brave as Yrsa!”

Gerald admonished him with an annoyed look on his face.

‘Just look at Juno’s disciple, Yrsa. She was just fine! She didn’t even show the slightest sign of fear and was very calm. On the other hand, look at Rey. The difference between the two was so obvious.’

“Um...”

When Rey was criticized by Gerald, he became embarrassed.

Yrsa and Juno, who were sitting beside them, watched and snickered.

“By the way, Brother Gerald, why did the wooden bridge break?”

Now, Rey looked at Gerald in confusion and asked.

“Because there were too many people on the bridge just now. That’s why the structure of the bridge was weakened. Besides, both ends of the bridge were hit by the stones, and that’s why it broke!”

Gerald explained briefly.

“Either way, we should consider ourselves lucky. If it wasn’t because of that, we would have been trapped on the bridge and ended up becoming insect food!”

Gerald didn’t forget to emphasize that.

Indeed, they had nowhere to escape to at that time.

If the wooden bridge hadn’t broken, Gerald and the other three would have had to face the man-eating insects, and they might have turned into white bones, just like the soul hunters.

“Then, what should we do next?”

Rey continued to ask.

“We’ll rest for a while, and then we will continue our journey. There must be another route to bypass this place!”

Gerald said directly.

Hearing what he had said, Rey and the girls didn’t have any objections. They always followed Gerald’s commands.

After all, they could only be safe when they were with Gerald.

After half an hour of rest, the four of them set off again.

But this time, it was better since they had finally gotten rid of the soul hunters.

That way, there wouldn’t be any obstacles ahead of them.

They wondered what had happened to the man in the cloak and his men.

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Chapter 1839

The four set off again. The path they took was considered easy as it was flat ground, so there was no danger.

The four had walked a very long distance unknowingly. They had passed by two hills and reached another hill.

Seeing that the sky was getting dark, Gerald and his friends found a spot to rest.

Right at that moment, a light caught their attention.

“Brother Gerald, look! There’s a house!”

Rey had sharp eyes, so he saw it right away and shouted at Gerald.

Gerald and the girls looked in the direction. Sure enough, it was a house, and there was smoke coming out of the chimney.

This surprised them very much. They never thought that there would be someone living in the deep forest. It was rather unbelievable.

Without any hesitation, they walked toward the house, which was at the bottom of the valley.

By the time they got there, it was already very dark.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Gerald stood at the door and knocked on it.

After a while, the wooden door was opened.

When the door opened, an old man appeared in front of them.

“Old man, could you let us spend the night at your place?”

Gerald smiled and asked the old man.

The old man glanced at Gerald and looked at Juno and Yrsa, who were behind Gerald.

Only then did he nod subtly.

“Sure, come in!”

Having said that, Gerald and the other three entered the house with the old man. They didn't forget to close the door properly.

Gerald and the others were very happy. They had been worried that the old man might not have agreed to let them in just now.

Once inside, the four of them walked into the room.

“Have a seat!”

The old man brought out four chairs for them, and they sat down.

“Thank you, old man!”

Gerald smiled and thanked the old man quickly.

Hearing what Gerald had said, the other three quickly thanked the old man as well.

“You must have not eaten yet, right?”

The old man did not bother about their thanks and asked them calmly instead.

Hearing his words, Gerald and his friends nodded in slight embarrassment.

They were indeed very hungry, and they hadn't eaten anything for one whole day.

Later, the old man served them some food and tea.

“There's nothing delicious, just these dishes. You can have them!”

The old man said to them as he served the food on the table.

“It's alright, old man. We're very grateful for the food you're giving us.”

Gerald said immediately.

It was good enough that he was willing to give them food. They wouldn't dare to be picky.

Soon after, they started eating.

As they were so hungry, everything tasted very nice.

After gobbling up the food, they were finally full.

“Buuurp!”

Rey acted like he always did, letting out a long burp when he was full.

“Old man, why do you live here alone?”

Gerald asked the old man.

The old man was working on something as he sat. He seemed to be weaving something with some bamboo.

“I’ve lived here since I was young!”

The old man gave Gerald a simple answer.

“What should we call you, old man?”

Gerald asked.

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Chapter 1840

“Bates.”

The old man simply told them his surname.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Bates. I’m Gerald Crawford. Thank you for letting us stay here tonight!”

Gerald quickly greeted the old man and expressed his gratitude.

“What are you guys doing here?”

Mr. Bates looked at the four of them and asked.

Gerald and the other three were startled by his question.

“Hehe. Mr. Bates, we came here just for a leisurely trip, but we lost our way.”

Gerald explained to Mr. Bates with a smile.

“Leisure? Young man, you must be taking me for a fool.”

Mr. Bates doubted his words and admonished Gerald.

Now, Gerald and the three were even more surprised. They didn't expect that Mr. Bates would actually know they were hiding something.

"Mr. Bates, why do you..."

Gerald asked, pretending to look at Mr. Bates in doubt.

"Young man, I've lived half of my life. You can't lie to me. You're not here for leisure. You are here to search for the territory of the Phangrottom Clan!"

Subsequently, Mr. Bates stated their purpose of coming here openly.

What?!

Their faces changed immediately, showing great surprise.

"Mr. Bates, how did you figure it out?"

Gerald asked curiously.

Although Mr. Bates knew their purpose for coming here, Gerald did not feel a sense of hostility from him.

“Hehe. This place is not a tourist attraction. People come here for just one thing, and that is to look for the territory of the Phangrottom Clan.”

Mr. Bates told them frankly.

Gerald and his friends were amazed. They never expected that Mr. Bates would be so observant.

“Since you have discovered it, I shall not hide it from you anymore. That’s right. We’re here to look for the territory of the Phangrottom Clan!”

Gerald didn’t hide it any longer and admitted it openly.

It was useless to hide and argue if your secret had already been discovered.

“Young man, the territory of the Phangrottom Clan is not a place anyone can go. I advise you to just go back to your place.”

Mr. Bates kindly reminded them.

They were a little startled when they heard that.

“Why did you say so?”

Gerald asked doubtfully.

“Hehe. There were many people like you coming here to look for the territory of the Phangrottom Clan. But in the end, no one came back alive. So, I’m saying this for your sake. Just leave tomorrow morning.”

Mr. Bates smiled as he reminded them again.

“Mr. Bates, we’re no ordinary people. Besides, we come with a mission to save the world.”

Gerald explained to Mr. Bates.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Hearing Gerald’s words, Mr. Bates burst into laughter, and his laugh was full of mockery.

“Young man, don’t say things like that. Those who came here said that as well. But what was the use of that? They still died here in the end.”

Mr. Bates uttered, totally disregarding what Gerald had said.

From what he had said, it seemed like Mr. Bates had met a lot of people. Moreover, their deaths might be related to him.

This was such a deep, old forest, and he lived here alone. This alone was already very strange and unbelievable.

“Mr. Bates, do you know the location of the territory of the Phangrottom Clan?”

After a pause, Gerald looked at Mr. Bates and asked.

Upon being asked that question, Mr. Bates raised his head and stared at Gerald.

After staring into each other's eyes for a few seconds, Mr. Bates opened his mouth.

"I'm sorry. I don't know where it is!"

Hearing his words, Gerald did not press him further.

However, Gerald could see that Mr. Bates probably knew the location of the territory of the Phangrottom Clan. He just refused to tell them.

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Chapter 1841

"I appreciate the reminder, Mr. Bates, but we still have an important mission to accomplish. Since the sooner we locate the territory of the Phangrottom Clan the better, we'll only be staying the night! We'll leave at dawn!" replied Gerald in a gratuitous tone as he looked at Mr. Bates.

Upon hearing that, Mr. Bates said nothing. Even so, if one paid close attention to his reaction, they would be able to see his face twitching slightly in response...

It was late into the night before Gerald and his party finally decided to sleep. To ensure that they wouldn't get sneak attacked in the night, Gerald suggested that the four of them take turns keeping watch.

After agreeing, Gerald was elected first to stay on guard whereas the others headed to bed.

Thankfully, even after his shift ended and he swapped places with Rey, nothing much really happened throughout the night.

The party of four awoke early the next morning and instantly began packing up. Gerald himself walked over to the door to check on how things were looking outside...

To his surprise, he was immediately greeted by the sight of Mr. Bates standing right in front of their door!

Definitely not expecting to meet Mr. Bates in such a way, the wide-eyed Gerald then stared at the calm-looking man for a while before asking, "...Is... there something I can help you with, Mr. Bates...?"

"Tell me, are you really sure that you want to look for the territory of the Phangrottom Clan? Is there no way to deter you?" asked Mr. Bates in a serious tone.

Upon hearing that, Gerald quickly shook his shock off before nodding and determinedly replying, "Indeed, Mr. Bates. We absolutely must go!"

"...Very well, then. Since you're so adamant, I'll lead you there. However, I must remind you that in the end, everything depends on your fate!" declared Mr. Bates, surprising Gerald once more.

Gerald, for one, hadn't expected Mr. Bates's attitude to change that quickly. After all, the man had been trying his hardest to deter them from looking for the territory of the Phangrottom Clan for most of the night. To think that he was now willing to lead them there!

Still, just as Gerald had thought, Mr. Bates knew where the territory of the Phangrottom Clan was. With that in mind, Gerald was prompted to wonder whether the death of the previous party—that had attempted to locate the place—had anything to do with Mr. Bates...

Regardless, Gerald's train of thought was cut short when he heard Mr. Bates say, "Let's not waste any more time. Hurry and pack up!"

Watching as Mr. Bates then turned around to leave, Gerald himself quickly ordered the rest of his party to hasten their packing.

Shortly after, everyone was ready to leave, and they began following Mr. Bates into the depths of the mountains...

Not a word was uttered throughout the entire journey, so eventually, Gerald took the initiative to break the silence by saying, "So... Why the change of heart, Mr. Bates?"

"Let's just say you're different from that previous party!" replied Mr. Bates in a calm tone.

"...Different in what way, Mr. Bates...?" asked Gerald in a curious tone.

"Hah! The earlier party who came looking for the clan were only interested in robbing the tomb! With how blinded by greed they were, it was pretty much impossible for them to locate the Phangrottom Clan in the first place! Them dying only makes sense!" replied Mr. Bates in a calm tone, almost as though he was unfazed by their deaths...

Growing even more curious now, Gerald then asked, "...How... exactly did they die, Mr. Bates...?"

"Hmm? I killed them of course," replied Mr. Bates.

The second he heard that, Gerald's expression instantly darkened. To think that Mr. Bates would confess to something like this so casually!

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Chapter 1842

“Don’t worry, I won’t harm you. After all, I trust you way more than that previous group!” added Mr. Bates when he saw the drastic change in Gerald’s expression.

Though Mr. Bates said that, Gerald was rightfully still slightly worried. After all, who knew whether the man was telling the truth? Despite his worries, Gerald understood that he still required Mr. Bates’s guidance for now.

With that in mind, he could only choose to act accordingly. The second Gerald found something amiss with Mr. Bates, he would surely deal with the man without mercy...

Following that awkward conversation, the group walked for about another hour before finally arriving at what appeared to be a gigantic Stonehenge lookalike...

Naturally bewildered by the sight of it, Gerald was prompted to ask, “And... this is?”

“This is where the portal that leads to the most feminine place can be opened. After passing through that area, you’ll soon be able to find the territory of the Phangrottom Clan. Mind you, however, that getting past the most feminine place isn’t as simple as you’re probably imagining. A weak mind will easily be overtaken by the many ghosts there, and once that happens, you’ll end up being trapped in there forever!” explained Mr. Bates in an earnest tone.

Upon hearing that, Gerald then took out the map that Old Flint had given him... And after looking at it for a while, there was no doubt about it. As it turned out, they really were at the right place. Mr. Bates hadn’t been fooling them at all.

With that in mind, Gerald then turned to look at Mr. Bates before asking, "...Then... When will the portal open?"

"It'll open in three days. That's the middle of the month, if you're curious as to why. Regardless, take note that the portal will only remain open for three days. If you fail to return before then, you'll be trapped there for life, even when the portal reopens in the future!" replied Mr. Bates in a kind tone.

"...Is there no other way we can enter that place...?" asked Gerald as he looked at Mr. Bates, not wanting to have to wait for three days. After all, he was sure that there were definitely other ways to enter the most feminine place.

Understanding Gerald's motive, Mr. Bates then said, "Patience is a virtue, young man! However... Since it was the heavens that fated our meeting, I suppose I could open the portal in advance. However, note that if I do so, only three of you are allowed to enter. One of you has to stay behind! Also, you can't enter alone either. There needs to be at least two of you, that's just how it is."

Despite that being the case, Gerald looked utterly delighted.

Watching as Gerald turned to face them, Juno was prompted to say, "Why don't you and Rey go, Gerald? I'll stay out here with Yrsa!"

Hearing that, Gerald thought for a moment before asking, "Say... Since you said that only two to three people can enter at a time... Could Rey and I enter first before Juno and Yrsa follow behind? That's technically entering in pairs, no?"

Since Mr. Bates immediately shook his head, Gerald could only sigh. It was worth a shot.

At that moment, Rey cleared his throat before saying, "...On the contrary, I think you should head there with Miss Zorn, Mr. Crawford. I'll stay out here with Yrsa!"

After all, since Juno and Gerald were both trained cultivators, they would be able to look out for each other more efficiently once they were inside.

To his surprise, Juno quickly replied, "No, it's too dangerous for you and Yrsa to stay out here without us. With that in mind, just go along with Gerald. That way, I can protect my disciple as we wait for your return."

"I'll have to agree with Miss Zorn. The two of us are entering, and that's that!" added Gerald, who was also worried that Rey and Yrsa would find themselves in deep trouble—if Gerald and Juno entered together—since neither of them could properly defend themselves.

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Chapter 1843

"...Alright then!" replied Rey with a nod.

Hearing that, Gerald then said, "It's decided then, Mr. Bates. Both of us will be entering, so please open the portal for us in advance!"

Upon hearing that, Mr. Bates said nothing. Instead, he walked over to the largest stone pillar in the middle of the 'Stonehenge' before pulling out a small knife from his sleeve...

After making a small cut in his hand, he placed his bleeding palm onto what appeared to be the symbol of a ghost eye on the pillar... and seconds later, the pillar began shaking as the other surrounding pillars began glowing in hues of blue!

Shortly after, a blue portal appeared before Gerald and his party...

“That’s the portal. Head in now, and remember. Only three days or you’ll never be able to leave!” reminded Mr. Bates as Gerald and Rey nodded.

“Got it! Don’t worry, Mr. Bates! Also, I’ll have to trouble you to take care of the two of them in the meantime. Thanks for everything!” replied Gerald in a determined voice as looked at the man.

After seeing Mr. Botes nod, Gerald and Rey then entered the portal... and the second they made it across, the portal vanished.

The pillars themselves instantly stopped glowing, making it seem as though nothing had ever happened here...

Regardless, after witnessing such a magical scene, both Juno and Yrsa could only gape in awe...

Meanwhile, Gerald and Rey found themselves walking through some kind of tunnel-like passage...

Leaning close, the already terrified Rey grabbed onto Gerald’s clothes while muttering, “P-please remember to protect me well, Mr. Crawford...!”

“...Didn’t you say that you weren’t afraid of ghosts?” grumbled Gerald.

“Well, yeah... I’m not afraid of ghost movies, but this is reality! Who knows when a ghost could pop up?” replied Rey in his slight cowardice.

Things were definitely way scarier when he wasn’t expecting ghosts to only pop up on screen!

Regardless, Gerald remained silent, knowing where Rey was coming from. After all, Rey wasn’t used to dealing with ghosts yet, so it was normal to be frightened. Courage would surely come once the lad got used to it.

Whatever the case was, it was about ten minutes later when they finally got out of the passageway... and they were instantly greeted by the sight of a large stone tablet.

Carved on it were four individual characters that stated, ‘The most feminine place’.

Looking beyond the tablet, the duo was able to see another path that seemed to lead to the centermost area in the most feminine place... That was also supposedly the area where various ghosts and spirits resided...

“The true adventure starts here, Rey. Prepare your mind and please refrain from screaming or shouting when anything happens! Just endure it!” warned Gerald as he looked at Rey.

After all, if Rey’s screaming accidentally disturbed the ghosts’ and spirits’ peace, it would surely spell a world of trouble for them...

“I-I’m ready, Mr. Crawford!” replied Rey after taking a deep breath.

Nodding slightly in response, Gerald then began leading the way into the depths of the most feminine place...

With how gloomy and dark the entire place was, just being here would surely send shivers down the spines of even the bravest of people... Naturally, Gerald and Rey were no exceptions.

If this was how it was going to feel throughout their stay here, it now made sense why Mr. Bates had made it compulsory for at least two people to enter at a time...

Had Gerald chosen to enter alone, he would surely be overpowered by the threatening ghostly aura around him... If that happened, he would essentially end up becoming a full ghost himself, causing him to be trapped in this place forever...

Regardless, after walking past a bridge, the duo soon came across a city of sorts...

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Chapter 1844

The city was known as Phantom City, and it was a city that was made specifically for ghosts and spirits.

From where they stood, Gerald and Rey could see that everything in the city looked ancient... The duo was also able to see several ghostly peddlers—that varied in appearance—scattered all over what appeared to be a market in the city.

Understanding that most of the spirit world was going to look like this, the duo decided to make haste and began walking toward the city's entrance...

However, upon reaching the city's gates, their entry was promptly blocked by a pale-faced man donning a long black robe.

Staring at the two with his blue eyes, the black-robed man declared, "Neither of you belong here. Leave!"

"Before that... Who exactly are you...?" asked Gerald.

"I go by Phanto, and I'm the phantom officer of this place!" introduced Phanto, much to the surprise of Gerald and Rey.

To think that phantom officers existed in the first place! It was almost like they were in some television drama or something!

After a slight pause, Gerald smiled faintly before replying, "We're only passing through this place, and we aren't here to cause trouble, sir. With that in mind, please allow us to pass!"

Since this wasn't his usual territory, Gerald knew that he had to refrain from acting rashly. At the very least, he needed to remain polite.

However, if a similar scene had happened in the real world, Gerald would've already made a move on whoever dared to obstruct his way. As if he would have the time to waste with politeness!

"Look, I need a passing permit to allow you to enter! If you don't have any, don't even dream about entering!" replied Phanto in a stern voice.

“A passing permit? How do we obtain one?” asked Gerald.

Hearing that, Phanto then pointed at a tall tower emitting dark blue lights—that honestly wasn’t all that far away—before explaining, “You can get it by passing a test there. Once you’ve got that done, you’ll receive your passing permit!”

“Thank you for sharing!” replied Gerald as he began walking toward the tower with Rey.

As it turned out, entering the most feminine places really wasn’t going to be as easy as they had anticipated. Since Gerald couldn’t think of any other way to enter and he would very much prefer to resolve this issue without using force, the only way forward was to pass that test... At the very least he wouldn’t end up offending any of the locals.

Regardless, they soon found that the tall tower’s gates had been tightly locked. Even so, they knew that there were individuals inside since the interior constantly glowed in that familiar blue hue...

With that in mind, Gerald was just about to knock on the door when suddenly, it swung open!

Before Gerald could even react, a cold and gloomy-sounding voice could be heard coming from inside, shouting, “Enter!”

Hearing that, Gerald was first to enter. However, just as Rey was about to follow, the gates suddenly slammed shut behind Gerald!

“...H-huh? What’s happening, Mr. Crawford...?” asked the astonished Rey.

“One individual at a time!” yelled the same voice from before.

Understanding that this was simply a rule to this place, the disheartened Rey could only sit on one of the tower’s many steps as he waited for Gerald to return...

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Chapter 1845

Gerald himself soon came across a white-haired person donning a long, grey robe...

“Hmm... I can see that you’re half human and half ghost!” said the robed person as he stared at Gerald from head to toe.

Naturally, this momentarily startled Gerald. To think that this person would be able to tell that easily!

“...And you are...?” asked Gerald.

“I go by Torme, and I’m the phantom emissary in the most feminine place. In simpler terms, I’m responsible for interacting with outsiders. It’s the reason why I was so easily able to discern your origins,” explained Torme.

“...I see. It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. I go by Gerald Crawford, and just as you’ve said, I’m half human and ghost. However, do note that I’m also a cultivator!” replied Gerald, not feeling the need to hide that fact.

“That would explain why there’s such a massive cocktail of spiritblade and holy spirit within your body... Still, the spiritblade you own is simply astonishing. If this continues on, something will definitely happen to you!” said Torme with only good intentions.

Of course, Gerald knew for a fact that Torme was talking about the Astrabys Sword that he had on him.

Choosing to ignore the topic, Gerald then declared, “...Whatever the case is, I’m here to obtain a passing permit, sir!”

“So it would seem. I’m assuming you’re trying to head to the territory of the Phangrottom Clan, correct?” asked Torme as he stared at the youth.

“Indeed!” replied Gerald with a nod.

“I assume you know that you’ll have to pass a test before you’re able to get the permit?” said Torme as he continued staring at the youth.

“I do. It’s the reason I came here in the first place!” replied Gerald in a determined voice.

“Very well, then. Are you prepared?” asked Torme.

“Ready as ever!” declared Gerald without the slightest hesitation.

The second Gerald’s sentence ended, however, Torme seemingly vanished as Gerald’s surroundings instantly darkened!

While a regular person would've certainly felt that the darkness was overbearing, Gerald was no ordinary person.

Standing calmly on the spot, it wasn't long after before a stone door appeared before Gerald.

"This will lead to the first stage of your test," said Torme from within the darkness.

Hearing that, Gerald then turned the doorknob... and upon opening the door, he was greeted by an astonishing sight.

Before him, was near-endless people killing each other! The fact that the individuals looked like they came from different time periods only served to confuse Gerald even more.

"From the past, till the present, war has never changed... Murder and death are simply interconnected. Regardless, here are three choices. Based on what you're currently seeing, would you choose to let all the villains die? Or perhaps you'd prefer to allow all the good people here to have a chance to get reincarnated. There's also the option of simply allowing fate to decide... Which will it be?" asked Torme's disembodied voice.

Upon hearing that, Gerald began pondering about it.

While the test may have seemed easy, Gerald knew that it was simply a front. After all, how could a test on human nature ever be that simple?

Either way, Gerald knew that all three choices weren't all that bad. The problem was, which was the correct answer? He really didn't want to fail the very first test...

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Chapter 1846

After thinking about it for a while longer, Gerald declared, "...I choose to let fate decide!"

"...Oh? An unexpected answer! Care to explain why?" asked Torme.

"Well, essentially, not one person can truly decide the life or death of themselves or others. In the end, fate is the final decider. If it truly is a person's time to meet their end, then there's simply no stopping it. With that in mind, I have no right to choose the eventual destinies of these people! While it's true that I'd love to have all the despicable villains die, I believe that they'll eventually reap what they've sown! After all, fate will surely grant them suiting ends when the time is right!" explained Gerald.

After saying all that, applause could instantly be heard as Torme said, "Not bad! You're different from the others! Congratulations, you've passed the first test!"

Following that, the darkness disappeared, and everything appeared the way it had previously been. Torme himself hadn't budged from the spot, though he was now smiling as he praised, "As you've said, nobody can truly decide the life and death of themselves or others. I'm glad to hear that you're not the kind of person to mercilessly kill others!"

While Gerald was surprised to know that he had passed the first test so easily, he quickly snapped out of it before politely replying, "I appreciate the compliment, sir!"

"Well said! Regardless, are you ready for your second test?" asked Torme.

“I am!”

Upon saying that, Gerald watched as Torme vanished once more and his surroundings began changing again...

In the end, Gerald was enveloped in darkness again... This time, however, there was a screen with quickly alternating scenes playing on it...

From what Gerald could see, the screen was projecting the experiences of a person from the moment he was born till the day he died...

“What you’re watching is a person’s entire life... Fleeting, isn’t it? Now tell me, what do you think about life?” asked Torme’s disembodied voice.

Hearing that, Gerald turned to look at the screen, wondering if he was now being tested on his understanding of life...

‘What do I think about life...? What even is life...?’ Gerald thought to himself.

After a brief pause, Gerald was prompted to ask, “...Have you experienced life as a human before, sir?”

“I have, though I refuse to experience such a life again!” replied Torme in a slightly remorseful tone that Gerald was immediately able to up.

From what Gerald could assume, Torme must have lived an excruciating life for him not to have another shot at it.

With that, Gerald then closed his eyes tightly as multiple scenes began playing in his mind... The scenes themselves were his own experiences from when he was young up till this very day...

While it was true that as a child, he had it pretty rough, he was now living quite a good life. Wasn't life just a series of joys and sorrows as well as partings and reunions?

It wasn't long after that thought when Gerald reopened his eyes before saying, "...While everyone's lives are different, to me, life is essentially just a cycle that one goes through from the day they are born till they die... The cycle itself is essential so that one gains enough experience to better themselves before they enter the afterlife..."

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Chapter 1847

"Pain, happiness, money, and family... all those are just small parts of life. In the end, what really matters are the choices one makes as they slowly proceed through the cycle of life... While I'm not sure what experiences you've undergone before, I do know that life isn't constantly filled with grief and pain. Enjoyable parts of life definitely exist, and once individuals realize that, they'll surely live better lives instead of constantly complaining about life's injustices..." explained Gerald.

While Gerald hadn't really grasped what the test was about in the beginning, after thinking about all this, he was now sure that he was being tested on how well he understood life.

What more, Gerald had noticed that the scenes playing on screen were simply Torme's experiences when he was still alive. With that in mind, Gerald was sure that the test was also done to help Torme resolve his inner issues.

Whatever the case was, Gerald was now sure that in order to have a good life, one had to experience it to the fullest. In doing so, individuals would be able to go through the most of their grief, joy, partings, and reunions before they eventually passed on...

Regardless, after Gerald stated his answer, Torme reappeared before Gerald again, causing the room to revert to the way it was.

Smiling subtly, Torme then said, "For hundreds of years, I've been waiting for a person to help me resolve all my resentment... Thanks to you, I'm no longer burdened by all this! As you've said, going through cycles is the only way that humans are able to progress! Congratulations, you've passed the second test!"

Hearing that, Gerald couldn't help but feel happy.

"...However, your life is much more different compared to others. After all, at this rate, you're going through way more gains and losses than any average joe could ever experience. With that in mind, I hope you're mentally prepared for the fact that in the end, some of those people will leave you for good..." added Torme.

Upon hearing that, Gerald's heart skipped a beat. From the looks of it, Torme could see Gerald's future...

While he now knew that, Gerald chose not to ask for any details. After all, there was no use knowing about the future. In the end, he was the one in control of his own fate, and he refused to deliberately change it just to alter the future that Torme saw.

Besides, it wasn't as though he was going to be able to alter his future the second Torme told him about it. Every action he made could vastly change his fate, after all.

Whatever the case was, Gerald simply nodded at Torme in response before saying, "Understood, sir!"

"Very good. Now then, let the final test begin!" replied Torme as he waved his hand, causing the scene to shift again...

While Gerald was surprised that Torme didn't even ask him if he was ready this time, he was even more astonished when he suddenly saw a figure slowly approaching him...

Squinting his eyes to get a clearer look at the figure, it wasn't long before the stunned Gerald realized who she was...

It was none other than Juno!

When Juno got close enough, she smiled faintly before calling out, "Gerald!"

Hearing her gentle, familiar voice, Gerald couldn't help but ask, "...Juno... You... Why are you here...?"

"Say... Why don't we stay here forever, Gerald...? Just you and me in the most feminine place... together," replied Juno, completely ignoring Gerald's question.

"...Huh? Stay... here? Of all places? Why would you even suggest such a thing...?" asked the deeply confused Gerald.

"...Hmm? Could it be that you're hesitant about staying here with me...?" replied Juno as her cheery expression instantly turned gloomy.

Before Gerald replied, he suddenly remembered that up till this point, everything that Torme had shown him had merely been illusions. With that in mind, he now knew that this 'Juno' was nothing more than just another illusion!

"...I refuse! After all, everything here is just an illusion!"

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Chapter 1848

After saying that, Gerald stared hard at the fake Juno... and in the end, his immense willpower was able to break the illusions around him!

Watching as everything returned to normal, the surprised Torme could only stare at Gerald. To think this youth would have such powerful willpower...

"...I've yet to meet someone who has willpower as great as yours... You truly are a powerful individual..." praised Torme.

"I appreciate the compliment, sir. Regardless, I assume you were testing me on my willpower?" asked Gerald slightly curiously.

"Indeed, and with how easily you broke the illusion, I'm pleased to say that you passed with flying colors! Your performance up till this point has been well over my expectations!" declared the amazed Torme.

Compared to all the previous others who had taken the test, Gerald was by far the fastest to shatter the illusion... It was incredulous, honestly.

Whatever the case was, Gerald then nodded before asking, "So... that's test three, correct? How many tests are there in total, sir...?"

Realizing that he hadn't told Gerald about that, Torme quickly replied, "There are a total of five tests, so only two remain now. Even so, I hope you don't let your guard down since the final two tests will be the deciding factor on whether or not you get your passing permit! I'll also say it in advance that those two tests are extremely difficult to pass, so you best prepare yourself mentally!"

"Worry not, sir! I'm ready and I'll definitely pass the tests!" replied Gerald confidently.

"Very well, then! Let the fourth test begin!" declared Torme with a nod as he changed the scene once more...

Once everything settled down, all that remained was a table that stood before Gerald... On it was a piece of paper, a pen, and three boxes...

Raising a slight brow, Gerald then walked over to the table to have a closer look...

The second he was close enough, Gerald quickly realized that the names 'Rey', 'Juno', and 'Yrsa' had been written on the three respective boxes...

Before Gerald could wonder what this test was about, Torme's disembodied voice could suddenly be heard saying, "Out of the three names before you, you'll need to choose one of them to die. Mind you, you'll only obtain the key to open the large entrance of the Phangrottom Clan's territory once you make your choice."

Stunned, Gerald could only mutter, "...That..."

Gerald was naturally unwilling to choose any of his dear friends to die. Unsure how to even proceed with this, he was prompted to ask, "...Is this truly the only way I'll be able to obtain the key to open the large entrance of the Phangrottom Clan's territory...?"

"Indeed!" replied Torme without the slightest hesitation.

Upon hearing that, Gerald now realized that Torme wasn't kidding when he said that the final two tests were exceedingly difficult...

"Just so you know, if you fail to choose anyone by the end of all this, you won't be able to obtain that key..." added Torme, clearly taunting Gerald.

Feeling at a loss, Gerald then began pondering on his next step... Until suddenly, he realized that he had a fourth option.

"...Sir, I'd like to choose myself!" declared Gerald as he wrote his own name on the paper without any hesitation...

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Chapter 1849

Just as Gerald was bracing for death to hit him, he stared wide-eyed as his surroundings reverted to how they had previously been.

“Congratulations, Gerald! You’ve passed the fourth test!” declared Torme with a smile as he walked toward Gerald.

Surprised, Gerald couldn’t help but mutter, “I... passed the test...?”

“Indeed, you have!” replied Torme with a nod.

“Then... was self-sacrifice the answer to that test...?” asked the confused Gerald.

“Not really. Rather than testing your willingness to sacrifice yourself, it was a test to see whether you’d choose your desires over your friends’ lives. Now that I’ve seen that you’re clearly one who cares greatly for your comrades, I can safely say that you’ve passed this test!” explained Torme.

After hearing that, Gerald realized that had he chosen any other option, he would’ve surely failed the test! However, the even bigger shock came when Torme added, “Also, had you chosen any of your three friends earlier, they would have died for real! With that in mind, you’ve essentially saved their lives!”

So... If he had chosen any of his friends, they would have perished just like that...? The thought of it alone sent shivers down his spine...

“Regardless, you truly are the kindest and most powerful person I’ve met to date... Now, for the final test... Are you ready?” asked Torme.

Taking a deep breath, Gerald then replied, “Bring it on!”

Nodding in response, Torme then waved his hand... and in the blink of an eye, Gerald found himself standing within a bamboo forest.

Confused, Gerald was prompted to ask, "...And... This is...?"

"The bamboos in this forest are known as soul bamboo. You'll pass the final test if you manage to break a few of them," explained Torme.

Upon hearing that, Gerald couldn't help but raise a brow. After all, bamboo in general was pretty easy to snap.

"Isn't... the fifth test a little too easy...?" asked Gerald in a confident tone.

Chuckling in response, Torme then calmly replied, "Go ahead and do so, then!"

Hearing that, Gerald then stood before a soul bamboo... and after taking in a deep breath, he swung the side of his hand toward the bamboo in one fluid but powerful motion!

Though a loud collision sound was heard due to the immense force Gerald had applied, the soul bamboo barely moved an inch.

Naturally, this stunned Gerald. To think that he would be unable to snap the soul bamboo... No wonder Torme had been so calm!

"Hmm? Didn't you say it was going to be easy...? All jokes aside, do understand that each soul bamboo hosts different meanings. Only after you understand the bamboo's meaning and principles will you be able to break it. In a way, fortune plays a rather large part in this," added Torme as he looked at Gerald with an interested gaze...

Quickly catching onto the hint that Torme had just given him, Gerald then replied, “Then... How should I access the meaning behind this soul bamboo?”

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Chapter 1850

Hearing Gerald’s question, Torme then explained, “You simply need to place your hand on the soul bamboo. Once you do, it’ll transmit its meaning into your mind. However, please remember to use your heart to feel it! Don’t ever be led astray!”

Immediately doing as Torme said, Gerald then placed his hand onto the bamboo... and all of a sudden, the soul bamboo began glowing in a light blue hue!

Gerald watched as the glow slowly enveloped his hand... and a split second later, the youth found himself standing within a white space.

Looking around, Gerald saw that aside from an old man—who was sitting cross-legged on the ground—and a Go board before that man, there was nothing else in this empty dimension...

While he was slightly stunned, Gerald quickly snapped out of it before walking over to the old man...

“Ah, here you are, mister! Come, have a seat!” invited the old man before Gerald could even say a word.

Upon hearing that, Gerald simply did as he was told.

Watching as Gerald sat opposite of him, the old man then said, "Since you're already here, why not play a game with me?"

Nodding in response, Gerald simply replied, "It would be an honor to play with you, sir!"

Smiling, the old man chose not to say anything as he slowly waved his hand... and just like that, the Go board was cleared.

Seeing that, Gerald respectfully said, "After you, sir!"

Still choosing to remain silent, the old man simply grinned as a stone hovered out from the Go bowl and placed itself on the board!

While the magical scene definitely surprised Gerald, he quickly snapped out of it, knowing that it was now his turn.

Taking a black stone out from the Go bowl, Gerald then placed it on the board as well.

While it was true that Gerald had some experience with Go, it wasn't a lot by any means. With that in mind, he wasn't particularly good at the game. Even so, the game was an immersive one, and the duo continued putting stone after stone on the board... until eventually, Gerald's defeat was sealed.

"Try not to get overly impatient or anxious, mister. You have to learn to understand the profound meaning of the game..." said the old man.

Upon hearing that, Gerald could immediately tell that there was some underlying meaning behind those words. If what he had managed to gather was correct, in order to fully grasp the bamboo's meaning, he first needed to understand the game inside out...

With that in mind, the second game soon commenced.

While Gerald was certainly no expert yet, he had improved considerably compared to the first game.

Gerald had realized that he had merely been on the defense throughout the first game. Due to that, he lacked the strength to counterattack at the last moment and was promptly defeated. In Torme's words, he had been 'led astray'.

Regardless, now that he knew where his mistake was, Gerald no longer remained on the defensive. Instead, he launched attack after attack! After a vigorous battle with the old man, however, Gerald still ended up losing.

"You've greatly improved from the last game, mister! Your success is near! I can feel it!" said the man before clearing the board again.

The second the third game began, Gerald took the initiative to attack. He wasn't about to get led astray by the old man anymore. Instead, he was going to be the dominant one this time!

Since his Go game skills had greatly improved by this point, it honestly surprised even Gerald himself that the old man wasn't able to launch any counterattacks.

Either way, after an even more vigorous battle than before, Gerald finally attained victory.

“Congratulations on gaining a complete understanding, mister! You may leave now!” said the old man after losing the game.

Surprised to hear that, Gerald was about to ask something when he realized that the old man and the go board had vanished!

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Chapter 1851

Upon returning to the real world, Gerald was instantly swept by feelings of relaxation as his mind acquired newfound understanding. As it turned out, returning from that white dimension was the final step for him to gain this understanding.

Looking at the soul bamboo before him, Gerald then lifted his hand... and with a swift strike using the side of his hand, he sliced the soul bamboo clean in half!

Pleased to have snapped his first soul bamboo, Gerald was now a hundred percent sure of what the first soul bamboo meant.

Essentially, one couldn't just expect to see instant benefits. Things needed to be done in proper order, and only then would success come... After all, while Gerald did lose the first two Go games, after learning the rules a bit better and observing how things went on the board, step-by-step, he was eventually able to win against that old man.

Regardless, upon seeing that the soul bamboo had been snapped, Tomie—who had been watching over Gerald this entire time—couldn't help but smile as he said, “Congratulations on breaking your first soul bamboo, Gerald!”

Smiling in response, Gerald then headed over to the next soul bamboo before placing his hand on it again. The sooner he got all this done with, the better.

Soon enough, Gerald found himself transported to yet another dimension. Compared to the previous white space, however, Gerald was greeted by the sight of several quickly alternating beautiful scenes...

Shortly after, another old man made his appearance before smiling warmly as he said, "Good day, mister. Tell me... What do you think these scenes symbolize...?"

Surprised by the sudden presence of the old man, Gerald quickly shook his shock off before asking, "...Before that, how should I address you, sir?"

Chuckling in response, the old man replied, "Well, I'm a psychic spirit, so you can call me that if you'd like!"

"I see... It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. Regardless, about your question... I can see that the scenes alternate endlessly among the four seasons. Spring, summer, autumn, and winter..." said Gerald in a respectful tone.

Nodding in response, the psychic spirit then replied, "Well, you're not wrong there. While the scenes do depict the usual seasons, there's another message to be found in all this... Why not try calming yourself to see if your heart can sense it?"

Upon hearing that, Gerald nodded before doing as the psychic spirit had told...

After a while, Gerald realized something and he opened his eyes again before saying, "...I think I understand now, sir. Essentially, not only do the scenes depict the four seasons, but they also symbolize the different experiences one undergoes in life."

“The spring scene displays a sprout which I’m assuming symbolizes the moment one is born. The summer scene, on the other hand, shows how hot it can get.

From what I can gather, it’s a way of saying how hardships and distresses are normal experiences as one grows older.

Moving on to the autumn scene, it depicts the harvest season, which should be when an individual feels the most accomplished they’ve ever felt in their life.

Finally, winter, the period of reminiscing. For me, winter symbolizes the moment when one nears the end of their life cycle...” explained Gerald.

The second his explanation ended, the psychic spirit instantly began clapping as he declared, “Not bad at all, mister! As you’ve said, the four seasons do indeed symbolize a person’s life.

I have to say, you truly are extraordinary to be able to have such a deep understanding of life! You really are different from the others! Regardless, you’ve completed my test so you can leave now!”

And just as before, Gerald’s consciousness was quickly transmitted back to reality...

Upon seeing the second soul bamboo before him again, Gerald immediately repeated the slicing action on it!

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Chapter 1852

As expected, this bamboo broke instantly as well, and by conquering it, Gerald now understood the meaning of life.

Essentially, one's life was like the four seasons since everyone experienced birth, sicknesses, and eventually death. It was simply according to the seasonal cycle. While one would definitely experience other things as well, nobody would truly be able to change their fate in the seasonal cycle of life.

Regardless, Torme himself was now smiling widely after watching Gerald successfully break the second soul bamboo. This youth wasn't disappointing him in the least!

Whatever the case was, Gerald didn't even wait for Torme to say anything before moving on to touch the third soul bamboo.

While Gerald was already used to having his consciousness getting transferred, he still found himself slightly stunned when he realized that standing before him, was a doppelganger!

"...And you are?" asked Gerald.

"Heh! I'm just you!" replied the other Gerald as he revealed a subtle smile.

"What? If you're me, then who am I?" said Gerald.

"You're me, and I'm you. There's nothing technical about that! We're simply the same person! Even so, we're different from the way we view things!" explained the other Gerald.

“...Different views? Elaborate,” replied Gerald.

Chuckling in response, the other Gerald then said, “To put it in layman terms, I’m your dark side! A fancier name would make me your inner demon!”

As it turned out, the lookalike was a manifestation of his inner demons! This must be the third soul bamboo’s test!

With that in mind, Gerald had a hunch that as long as he managed to defeat the demon, he would be able to fully understand this soul bamboo.

“Whatever the case is, you’re an idiot, Gerald. Why the hell didn’t you just pick Rey in exchange for the key to the large entrance of the Phangrottom Clan territory? Picking yourself... You could’ve died you know?” added the other Gerald in a gloomy tone.

Upon hearing that, Gerald stared at his inner demon for a while before retorting, “As if I’d ever use my friends as bargaining chips! I’ll never sacrifice them!”

“You utter buffoon! That Rey? He’s just a prick and you know it! You could’ve easily gotten rid of him for good! How stupid do you have to be for me to spell it out for you?!” scowled the inner demon as he glared at Gerald.

“Shut it! You’re just my inner demon! In the end, I’m the one who decides on what I think!” growled Gerald who was getting fed up with his inner self.

Upon hearing that, the inner demon instantly roared in laughter as everything around them turned pitch black. The scene was nothing short of terrifying...

“Talk big, will you? Look, I can easily just swallow you up, you know? Once that happens, you’ll be beneath me your entire life!” scoffed the inner demon as he smiled wickedly while staring at the youth.

Before Gerald could even reply, his eyes widened as his other self summoned an incredibly familiar-looking sword...

“...The Astrabyss Sword?!” yelled Gerald, feeling slightly stunned that the demon could also wield the legendary weapon.

“Things could have gone much differently, Gerald! But due to how idiotic you are, you only have yourself to blame! I’m vanquishing you for good so that I’ll be the rightful owner of your body and mind!”

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After saying that, his inner demon began charging toward Gerald!

Since the inner demon was an exact replica of Gerald, he shared the same strength and capabilities as Gerald. Naturally, Gerald noticed this, and he immediately began retreating as he dodged the onslaught of attacks!

Unfortunately, since their skills were on par, Gerald’s neck ended up getting slightly cut by the sharp blade.

The Astrabyss Sword's tip had merely brushed across Gerald's skin, yet it was already bleeding... Gerald didn't even want to imagine what would happen if the sword struck him for real...

Whatever the case was, he couldn't allow this inner demon to get rid of him. After all, if he lost this battle, he would lose control over his body forever!

With that in mind, once he was at a safe distance, Gerald drew out his own Astrabyss Sword.

"Hah! Thinking of launching a counterattack?" sneered the inner demon.

"You won't have your way! I'm burying you deep in my heart so that you'll never be able to resurface again!" declared Gerald in a righteous tone.

"Let's see if you can win against me first!" yelled the inner demon as both he and Gerald bolted toward each other!

Since both of them were equally fast, their blades met even before a split second passed!

With a massive 'clang' the impact of the two legendary blades caused both of them to take a few steps backward!

"I hope you haven't forgotten that I'm your dark side, Gerald! I don't have anything weighing me down! With that in mind, I'm way stronger than you!" scoffed the inner demon in a smug tone before he immediately began chanting a spell...

Within seconds, Gerald watched as all sorts of knife brandishing ghosts began appearing! The inner demon had summoned them from the Astrabyss Sword to deal with Gerald!

Though the spirits immediately began rushing toward Gerald, the youth remained calm and simply took out the spirits, one by one...

However, no matter how many spirits he slew, more would just appear... That b*stard of an inner demon was simply summoning no end to them!

Laughing maniacally as Gerald got surrounded by yet another group of spirits, the inner demon then smugly proposed, "Gerald, listen. Wouldn't it be great if we just cooperated? With your intellect and my strength, we'd surely be an unstoppable force!"

Naturally, Gerald wasn't going to agree to that anytime soon.

While the inner demon may have thought that Gerald's loss was already determined, Gerald knew that his other self was merely a temporary manifestation of his worst aspects. With that in mind, there was no way Gerald was going to let that nobody surpass him!

As he thought about that, an idea suddenly came to Gerald. Understanding that it was now or never, Gerald immediately began projecting his immense will and psychokinetic powers around him.

The second he started doing so, his inner demon immediately began suffering a severe headache!

Slowly kneeling, the inner demon held on to his aching head as he asked, "You... The hell have you done...?!"

“Remember, you’re just a momentary manifestation of my inner demons. With that in mind, you won’t be able to defeat me in a million years! My true power will always be stronger than yours!” scoffed Gerald as he walked over to his other self and grabbed it by the neck.

Glaring at his inner demon fine final time, Gerald then increased the force of his grip while yelling, “Exterminate!”

And just like that, the inner demon vanished, sending Gerald’s consciousness back to reality...

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With that, Gerald successfully made it past his third soul bamboo, and with a swift attack, he instantly split it clean in half!

Walking up to Gerald, Torme then smiled as he said, “Congratulations for defeating your inner demon, Gerald!”

Slightly stunned that Torme knew about his battle, Gerald was prompted to say, “Sir... You... Knew?”

“Indeed. I saw all that happened in each of the soul bamboos. I also know what each soul bamboo here stands for. Regardless, had you failed to defeat your inner demon, you’d have ended up getting swallowed by him.

If that came to be, I’m sure you’re aware that not only would your consciousness get sealed deep within your heart forever, but that inner demon of yours?

He'd take your place! Thankfully, you managed to defeat him! I must say, you haven't disappointed me at all!" declared Torme as he looked at Gerald with a satisfied expression.

Watching as Gerald nodded, Torme then added in a serious tone, "Inner demons are dark manifestations that exist in everyone's hearts. Sadly, not many are actually capable of truly vanquishing them.

While I've come across many people who've attempted to defeat their inner demons, they always ended up getting swallowed by their inner demons, resulting in them becoming their worst nightmares... With that in mind, since you've managed to make it past your demons, I have to say I greatly admire you, Gerald!"

"I appreciate the compliment, sir! Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll proceed with the next soul bamboo!" replied Gerald in a gratuitous tone before walking toward his fourth soul bamboo.

However, before he was able to touch it, Torme suddenly shouted, "Wait!"

Turning around, Gerald raised a slight brow as he asked, "Is... something the matter, sir...?"

"There's no need to go through the fourth soul bamboo. You've passed the test!" replied Torme, astonishing Gerald quite a bit.

Before Gerald could even reply, he watched as Torme waved his hand... and just like that, both of them were back in the tower.

"Have... I really passed everything, sir?" asked the confused Gerald.

“Indeed! You’re the most outstanding cultivator I’ve ever met! With that in mind, you have every right to head to the Phangrottom Clan’s territory! As promised, I’ll also be handing you the key to the large entrance of that territory! While I’m sure you’re on some extraordinary mission, do remember that in the end, whether you’ll be able to obtain what you want ultimately depends on fate...” said Torme.

Gerald himself was currently too pleasantly surprised and excited to feel down by that statement. To think that he had managed to pass the test without needing to fully complete it! Torme was even giving him the key to the large entrance of the Phangrottom Clan’s territory!

The youth’s train of thought was cut short when Torme revealed a rectangular wooden box before handing it to Gerald as he said, “The box contains the key I promised. It’s yours to take now!”

Taking the box, Gerald then slowly opened it... and inside, was an iron key with the Phangrottom Rune on it.

Glad to have finally obtained it, Gerald immediately replied, “Thank you, sir!”

“You’re very welcome, though honestly, you deserve the key. Regardless, a bit of advice before you head off. The Phangrottomts are a spiritual clan that rules over all souls... With that in mind, I’m sure you can imagine that they’re not ones who are easy to persuade. What I’m saying is please make sure that you’re mentally ready to face everything, and that includes quite a bit of pain. It’s not a stretch to claim that your real test will begin once you arrive there!” advised Torme.

“Got it. I’ll keep that in mind!” replied Gerald in a respectful tone.

“I’m sure you will. Now head off! The passing permit is already hanging on your waist!” said Torme as he waved his hand at Gerald.

Upon hearing that, Gerald instantly looked at his waist area... as true to Torme's words, a passing permit was hanging there! When had Torme even done the deed...?

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Whatever the case was, Gerald simply nodded before walking out of the tower...

Upon exiting, he saw that Rey was taking a nap with his back leaning against the tower's walls!

Squatting down, Gerald then patted Rey's face a few times while saying, "Hey, I wasn't in for that long... Are you seriously sleeping here?"

Quickly waking up, the shocked Rey couldn't help but exclaim, "A-ah! Mr. Crawford! You're finally out? I've been waiting for ages!"

"...Ages? I'm pretty sure I've been in there for half an hour at most," replied Gerald as he raised a slight brow.

Then again, Rey wasn't one to lie. Could the time in the tower move differently compared to the time in the outside world...? After all, as they said, 'a day in heaven was equivalent to a year in the human world'. With that in mind, who's to say that the tower didn't function following those rules? While it wasn't completely out of the question, it still seemed rather magical to Gerald.

"...Regardless, I've managed to obtain the passing permit, so let's go!" added Gerald, not wanting to bother about something that trivial. After all, the more crucial thing to do now was to enter the Phantom City...

Soon after, the duo arrived at the city's gates again, and upon showing the passing permit to the phantom officer, they were finally granted access into the place...

"...Say... What exactly did you have to do to obtain the passing permit, Mr. Crawford...?" asked Rey in a curious tone.

"Let's just say I had to go through some tests of life," replied Gerald, knowing that his answer was the truth despite how vague it sounded.

As Gerald recalled all the principles and experiences of life that he had been tested on back in the tower, he couldn't help but feel pleased that after all that, he managed to obtain the key to the large entrance of the Phangrottom Clan's territory as well.

Whatever the case was, Rey naturally didn't know what Gerald was going on about, prompting him to say, "...Huh? Come again...?"

Shaking his head, Gerald then leaned closer to Rey before whispering, "Forget about that for the moment. I actually have some good news to share! See, I've managed to obtain the key to the large entrance of the Phangrottom Clan's territory!"

Upon hearing the good news, Rey immediately grew excited as he exclaimed, "Really?"

"Hush! Aren't you worried at all that others may learn of this?" replied Gerald as he glared at Rey while gesturing for him to keep it down.

Upon hearing that, Rey instantly calmed down, making sure to cover a hand over his mouth to ensure no further noise came out from him...

After walking for a while longer, the duo came across a town within Phantom City. While it looked no different from human settlements, the ghosts here had their own lifestyles that were evidently different compared to how humans lived.

As the duo watched hordes of ghosts wandering along the streets of the town, it wasn't long before a few phantom soldiers—riding phantom horses—encircled Gerald and Rey!

"Both of you, come with us!" ordered one of the soldiers in a frigid tone.

