

**the
black
orb**

the black orb

ewhan
kim

TRANSLATED BY
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Black Orb

‘YOUNGSTER, WATCH OUT FOR—’

An old man bumped into Jeong-su as they passed each other, but Jeong-su couldn't hear *what* it was he should watch out for. He turned around, but the old man had already exited the alley and disappeared. Perhaps he was warning Jeong-su to watch where he was going. But was that really it?

It was a hot Sunday evening, and Jeong-su, a thirty-one-year-old man in a T-shirt, shorts, and sandals, was out for a walk in the network of alleys behind his house. He exhaled a long stream of smoke as he thought about the fight he had just had with his father.

It was all because he had gone out to buy a few packs of cigarettes and had missed his parents' phone call. He called them back as soon as he returned home, but they didn't pick up. They called him again while he was in the bathroom, but when he called them back, the line was

busy. Thinking they would call again if he just waited, he relaxed as he watched some Sunday-night TV.

Forty minutes later, his father called, mad as can be: 'Why don't you pick up the phone? I called you, but the line was busy. And when I called again, it went straight to voicemail. What on earth is going on? You should at least do your parents the courtesy of calling them back!' Jeong-su's father immediately started berating Jeong-su, not giving him the chance to explain. 'Whatever, I called because I needed your help with something urgent. But I found someone else to help.' And with that, Jeong-su's father hung up.

This ruined Jeong-su's mood. His parents called him on the weekends to ask how he was doing and pester him about getting married. He assumed this was just another one of those phone calls. He had no idea it was about something important. He considered calling his father back but didn't.

It was after this when Jeong-su, in poor spirits and holding a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, decided to go out for a walk.

He met eyes with a man in a tank top and shorts who was smoking in the alley. Jeong-su kept walking, turned a corner, and encountered yet another man, this one in a T-shirt and track pants. They were all smokers who had been chased into the alleys by their family members. Jeong-su thought it fortunate he could enjoy a cigarette without feeling guilty.

He considered his life a happy one. He was young, his

parents were in good health, and he had a job, a house, and a car. Compared to those in the alley, his life wasn't so bad. Realizing this, he felt his mood improve.

It was strange. A person's mood could be easily ruined, easily improved, and just as easily ruined again. An angry phone call from one's parents, or an increase in the tobacco tax – that was all it took to ruin a perfectly happy weekend. He could only imagine how unhappy he would be if something *actually* bad happened, like being fired, getting into a car accident, or contracting a terminal illness. Indeed, if his happiness was so affected by something as trifling as an angry phone call, what if he were confronted with a real catastrophe? All Jeong-su could do now was wait until his mood improved and he regained his desire to live. But for that, he'd probably need a few more packs of cigarettes.

The summer weather was terribly hot. Jeong-su stopped walking once his body temperature started to rise, and sat on the steps near the entrance to the alley.

'Youngster,' Jeong-su said, mimicking the old man's tone, 'watch out for . . .'

For what? Was he really just warning Jeong-su to watch where he was going? Jeong-su shouldn't have been thinking about the encounter this much, but for some reason, it kept coming to mind. Lost in thought, he continued to smoke until four cigarette butts littered the ground around his sandals.

It was time to go home. Time for everyone – his parents, his friends, his enemies, even the old man from earlier that

day – to get ready for Monday and go to bed. He figured he might as well join them. But before he went to sleep, he wanted to call his parents one more time. His father should have calmed down by now. And if not, there was nothing he could do. He got to his feet and headed home.

But, as he passed the place where he bumped into the old man, he thought again about the man's warning. He still had no idea what the man had been referring to. The man had been well dressed: neatly combed hair, his shirt tucked in, a belt (which many old men forwent), and immaculate sneakers. Jeong-su knew of a few old people like this, who always dressed in nice clothes when they left the house. What was it like, he wondered, to live such a long and tidy life?

Where was the old man headed at so late an hour dressed in such nice clothes? And where was he now? And what in the world was he warning Jeong-su about? His tone sounded like he was warning Jeong-su of something more important than just sidewalk etiquette. Perhaps there was a large sinkhole in the alleyway. Jeong-su looked around but didn't see any such hole.

What he found was a completely different kind of danger.

Jeong-su stopped walking because the alley seemed different. At first, he thought the streetlamps were out. But that wasn't it; they were on. Blocking the alley was an object. The jet-black surface of this object blended into the surrounding shadows, making it seem like the alley was shrouded in darkness.

Jeong-su had never seen such an object before. It was about two metres tall, perfectly round, and didn't reflect light. Jeong-su felt like he was staring into a hole in the fabric of space. The object was several steps away from him.

'What is that?'

Someone seemed to be wondering the same thing as Jeong-su. Standing next to him and staring at this mysterious object was Jeong-su's neighbour. He had a plastic bag in his hand and was in mid-step. He must have been out to throw away the compost. But this spherical black shadow was blocking his way.

'It's so dark,' Jeong-su's neighbour said. 'Do you know what that is?'

Jeong-su didn't. The neighbour dragged his sandals across the floor as he approached the object. The heavy bag of compost swung like a pendulum as he walked.

'Someone's furniture? A car? It wasn't here just a moment ago. Don't people know not to park here?'

As the neighbour said this, the shadow appeared to be growing. But Jeong-su quickly realised that wasn't it. No, it was moving – moving closer. And this wasn't a shadow; it was a physical object.

But what kind of object, he didn't know.

Wary of this mysterious thing, Jeong-su took a step back.

'Is it a balloon?' the neighbour asked as he reached toward the object. But just as his hand made contact with the surface, his fingers passed through it and into the inky blackness. As the object continued moving unabated

toward the man, the rest of his arm, starting with his wrist, forearm, then elbow, disappeared inside.

‘What in the world?’

It happened so fast that the neighbour couldn’t even process it. It was only when the thing reached his shoulder that he began panicking. He dug his heels into the ground to stop himself from going any farther, but it was too little too late. The man let out a scream as his sandals began dragging across the asphalt.

‘Argh! Aaaaaaargh! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!’

The object moved past his shoulder and on to his head. When his mouth disappeared, so did the screams. Next was his torso. And when it was halfway down his other arm, the garbage bag he was holding fell to the ground. His legs flailed in the air for a moment before finally being sucked into the darkness. This was the last Jeong-su saw of his neighbour.

Now it was advancing toward Jeong-su. Although he was terrified, he was incapable of taking his eyes off the object as he frantically retreated. As the object followed him and passed under a bright streetlamp, Jeong-su got a good look at it.

The object was a black orb, roughly two metres in diameter. It resembled all at once a large bowling ball, a black weather balloon, and a metal marble. And despite its large size, it made no sound as it moved. Although it wasn’t chasing Jeong-su fast enough to catch him, it was unrelenting and persistent in its pursuit, almost as if it had locked on to its next target.

He started to run.

‘Help!’ he cried. ‘Please, someone help! Save me!’

But no one came out of their home. He had just witnessed something horrible. His neighbour had disappeared. His life was in danger. And yet no one cared enough to come help.

Jeong-su ran into the nearest supermarket. Two old women, who had been sitting in front of a TV and chatting, looked up at him.

‘May I help you?’

‘Outside. Over there. There’s a thing. Something horrible!’

‘Come again?’

‘Someone disappeared. Over there. This huge thing absorbed a man. We need to call the police. Hurry!’

‘Was there a car accident or something?’

‘Not a car accident. My neighbour disappeared!’

The two women looked at each other in silence. They reluctantly followed him out of the store, more concerned about missing their soap opera than what he had to show them.

‘What did you see again?’ one of them asked.

He pointed to the alley, saying that a dark object had absorbed a man. But there was nothing there. No matter how many times he explained, the two women just stared at him with suspicious looks on their faces. Eventually, they walked back into the store.

He stood there alone, where that thing had swallowed his neighbour, and glanced around.

What did I just witness? What was that thing that just absorbed my neighbour? Was it a ghost? But ghosts only appeared in old tales. Perhaps an animal? But an animal that large, in the middle of Seoul? Besides, animals don't absorb people whole. Then what was it? Am I going crazy? No, I know what I saw!

He shook his head.

He was as healthy as an ox and worked out often. He couldn't even remember the last time he felt ill. There was no way he was seeing things.

I know what I saw. A large black orb. A large black orb that moves slowly and swallowed my neighbour! So, if it wasn't a hallucination, where did it go? It must have followed me out of the alley. Wouldn't that mean it's out on the main road? It couldn't have gotten far. After all, it was slow enough for me to outrun it.

Jeong-su looked up and down the alley searching for the strange object, but it was nowhere to be found. When he raised his hand to wipe the sweat from his brow, he realised he had been clenching his fist and crumpling his pack of cigarettes. He hadn't let go of them since seeing the black orb.

He felt a mix of emotions. He wondered how this could happen and wished that it was all just a hallucination. If only this hadn't happened, if only he hadn't gone out for a smoke, if only he had turned off the lights and gone to bed, he would have been able to enjoy a peaceful Sunday evening. He took the pack of cigarettes and put them in his pocket.

‘Aaaaaaargh!’

Someone was screaming nearby. This time, it was the scream of a woman. A scream of terror. The scream of someone in the jaws of death. A hair-raising scream of someone fighting for their life. The same scream his neighbour had made just minutes ago. As Jeong-su processed the woman’s scream, the black orb emerged out of the alley wall. It crossed the width of the alley, then passed through the opposing wall and disappeared into another building.

Jeong-su immediately turned around and ran home. There was no doubt in his mind now. A woman had just been absorbed by the orb, and now it was going around the neighbourhood looking for its next victim.

When Jeong-su arrived home, he paced nervously around his house. He picked up his cell phone and tried calling the police, but just as he was about to dial, his mind went blank. He couldn’t remember if it was 112 or 119.

As he stood there lost in thought and holding his phone, he became afraid of what would happen if the orb followed him to his home. He locked the door, closed all the windows, and barricaded himself inside the bedroom. But he immediately unlocked the door and went back into the living room to pace.

I definitely saw that thing pass through a wall and disappear into another building.

He didn’t know how this was possible, but considering the fact the orb could pass through objects, he realised he wasn’t safe just locking his doors.

But if my home isn't safe, what should I do?

Finally, Jeong-su concluded he needed to run. He needed to get as far away from that thing as possible.

He found a duffle bag and packed it with whatever was in reach – not just necessities like his wallet and cell phone, but random things like hats, business cards, and matches. He didn't know why he was packing these things, but he didn't have the focus to tell the difference between what he needed and what he didn't.

He went to the bathroom to get his toothbrush, some soap, and a razor, then realised he needed to pee and walked over to the toilet – after all, it might be a long time before he saw another toilet. As he stood there, he repeatedly glanced around, afraid that the orb would appear behind him. Because of this, the ten plus seconds it took for him to relieve himself felt like an eternity.

When Jeong-su left his house and hurried toward his car, he kept his distance from dark shadows and walls. If someone else had been watching him, they would have thought him mad. When he arrived at his car, he opened the door with shaking hands and quickly hopped into the driver's seat.

But just before he started the car, he paused.

How can I be sure I'm not hallucinating?

He thought for a moment. His neighbour had disappeared. And he had heard the screams of another. But if two people really had been killed, would the neighbourhood be this quiet? He looked down at his shoes, which he hadn't put on properly. In the back seat of his car was

his bag and a mess of clothes. The car door, which was still open, was starting to chime.

Am I really in danger? Am I positive I'm not seeing things?

Then, suddenly, he saw through his rear-view mirror a woman run out of a building. Behind her was the black orb. The woman tripped as she ran for her life, and as she fell, her foot grazed the surface of the orb, initiating the absorption process. She let out a piercing scream. Finally, Jeong-su came to and turned around. He stared through the back window and watched as she was sucked into the orb.

First her legs disappeared, then her body. But just before her head was pulled in, she turned to look at Jeong-su. Her face was filled with anguish and horror. Her arms, which were still outside the orb even after her head disappeared, thrashed wildly looking for something to grab on to, but eventually, they too were pulled in.

The orb now turned to Jeong-su and started toward him. He quickly shut his door and turned the key to start the engine. All the while, the orb was slowly coming closer and closer. He glanced through the rear-view mirror again, getting a good look at the orb's surface, which was impenetrably black and as smooth as mercury.

Although this thing looked like a perfectly spherical bowling ball, it was like no ball he had ever seen. Jeong-su was turning the key to the right, but the car was just putting and not starting. The orb, which was moving closer and closer, finally reached the car. When this happened, it passed through the trunk like a shadow falling on the ground, then reappeared through the back seat.

Finally, the car started.

Screeeeech.

The sound of the car's wheels trying to get traction filled the alley. The car started moving forward, leaving the black orb behind. Jeong-su kept his foot on the gas, going faster than he had ever driven through this alley. All the while, the undeterred orb continued to slowly pursue him. When he turned the corner in the alley, an old man appeared and stood in front of the car, forcing Jeong-su to slam on the brakes.

He looked in the rear-view mirror to see how close the orb was, but because his car had already rounded the corner, he couldn't see the alley from which he just escaped.

'I heard a woman scream,' the old man said as he stuck his head through the driver's side window. 'What happened?'

Seeing Jeong-su panting and unable to answer, the old man pressed the issue.

'What's the matter? Why aren't you saying anything? You didn't hit her with your car, did you?'

'It wasn't my car. There's a horrible thing back there. Look—'

'You're lying. I bet you hit someone and are trying to run.'

The old man, who must have heard the woman's scream and the screeching of rubber meeting road, seemed to think there had been a car accident. Jeong-su had no idea how to explain to this old man that there was a dark,

spherical monster roaming the neighbourhood swallowing people whole.

The two women from the store (the same two who had refused to believe Jeong-su and given him suspicious looks) appeared again to see what all the commotion was about. The old man implored the old women to call the police because there had just been a car accident.

‘If you don’t run, you’re all dead!’ Jeong-su shouted finally. ‘A black orb is killing people! You’re all dead if you don’t run!’

The old man and the women looked at each other, not sure what to say, then turned to look down the alley Jeong-su was pointing at. By now, the black orb had just come out of the alley. It wasn’t fast, but it was persistent.

‘What is that?’ one of the old women muttered.

Jeong-su stepped on the gas and left the three people behind. The old man stepped in front of the two women and extended his hand toward the orb. And then, just as with the others, he let out a scream as the orb pulled him into the darkness. Seeing the old man be devoured just feet from them, the old women also started screaming. Jeong-su exited the alley on to the main road and didn’t look back.

Car

WHEN JEONG-SU WOKE UP, the first thing he looked at was his phone, which he had been holding on to tightly all night. Twelve-twelve p.m., and no missed calls nor any messages. He stretched his back and neck, which were stiff from sleeping in his car, and blinked several times trying to wake himself up.

He felt foolish for falling asleep while that black orb was still at large. He had spent the whole night nervously driving around the city trying to figure out where to go. When he finally parked his car, it was dusk and he was near his office. Tired from driving all night, he eventually fell asleep in the driver's seat.

Still half-conscious, he rubbed his eyes before noticing a woman walking by. She gave him an inconspicuous glance before continuing down the street. He let out a sigh. He was relieved by how normal the woman's behaviour was.

She looked as though she was on her way to lunch, like it was just another day. She didn't look like a person who knew there was a mysterious black orb wandering the streets of Seoul killing people.

Indeed, it was a sunny Monday afternoon, and the world seemed as peaceful as ever. But this didn't make sense to Jeong-su.

He had spent the whole night running for his life. As he drove around, he listened to the radio, expecting reports of the people-eating black orb. But they never came. He even made phone calls to his friends, but no one picked up or called him back. Because he had called everyone he knew, he was transfixed by the idea that the telephone lines were down because of the orb.

But he realised this wasn't the case when a few minutes later, he received a phone call from his mother. She asked why he had called so late last night.

'It was because of the fight you had with your father, wasn't it? Don't take it personally. He's been a bit irritable lately. He's always had a bit of a temper. You know that.'

All Jeong-su could say was, 'Right, I get it.'

Finally, he asked if she had seen anything strange recently.

'Anything strange? What do you mean?'

'It's nothing. Forget I mentioned it,' he said as he hung up.

He continued to wait in his car, but there was no news of anything unusual. The world was going round, just like it always had, and it was only he who was in panic mode.

The day was starting to warm up. Jeong-su rolled up his windows to prevent the hot air from entering the car and turned on the air conditioning. As he did this, he met eyes with himself in the side-view mirror. He sat there in silence and stared at his own face for a while.

Whenever he looked in the mirror, he was always met with a cheerful face. Indeed, Jeong-su liked how he looked. Everyone always commented on what a handsome man he was. Jeong-su was happy to be born with a face that made others want to be his friend. Not wanting to waste his good looks, he made a special effort to always smile. But because he had stayed up all night and feared for his life, he looked weary and the area beneath his eyes looked hollow. How, he wondered, could one man's face change so much in the span of one night?

'Because I almost died,' he answered himself.

The terror that Jeong-su felt as he ran from that black orb had changed his appearance. He could still hear the hair-raising screams of the people who had been absorbed into the black orb: his neighbour, that faceless woman, the woman who tripped, and the old man he left behind in the alley.

'They all must be dead.'

But Jeong-su had made it out. He hadn't been killed. And yet something didn't add up. At least four people were now missing, if not dead. How could Seoul be so peaceful? And why was no one returning his calls? Jeong-su looked at his phone. He had no missed calls. Stranger yet, no one from work had contacted him. It was past noon, and

he hadn't shown up at work. There was no way his boss hadn't called him.

Shouldn't they be asking each other why I'm so late? Why haven't my boss or clients called to ask where I am?

A travel program rerun from that weekend was playing on Jeong-su's GPS screen, which had TV service. The host was showcasing local restaurants just outside of Seoul, festivals from rural parts of the provinces, and popular pets.

Maybe they already destroyed the thing.

He imagined police being dispatched to his neighbourhood, discovering the black orb and opening fire on it. Once their bullets pierced it, the orb exploded, ending the crisis. Or perhaps the orb disappeared just as suddenly as it appeared, back into the shadows of the dark alley it was first discovered in.

If the orb disappeared and the world had gone back to normal, did that mean he could go back to his daily life, too?

He took out a cigarette from his pocket. Realizing this was his last one, he searched through his bag to find more packs, but there were none. He let out a laugh in disbelief as he realised he had left all his cigarettes at home. He couldn't believe he brought all this useless junk and not a single pack of cigarettes, the one thing he really needed. He looked down at the items in his bag. He felt bothered by the cluttered mess of spare toothbrushes and underwear stuffed in the bag.

Deciding to go buy some cigarettes, he opened his car

door and stepped out into the world. He stretched his back and legs in the warm afternoon sun. Having spent all weekend at home sleeping and not exercising, his body felt sluggish. He wanted to go and exercise for an hour or two. But would he have a chance? Was it really safe out there?

He surveyed his surroundings as he headed toward the convenience store. In the show window of an electronics store were brand-new HD television monitors which were all showing the same rerun he had seen in his car. In the spicy beef soup restaurant next door was a middle-aged woman mopping the floor. The stoplight changed from red to green, then back to red. The bored cashier at the convenience store gave Jeong-su his cigarettes and change like it was just another day.

When he left the convenience store, he lit a cigarette and sucked the smoke into his mouth. But instead of inhaling, he just held it in until he couldn't stand the bitterness any longer. He always did this when he had a lot on his mind.

Now where should I go? Home? The office? Or maybe I should wait longer? If I go to work, what excuse will I give?

Jeong-su would look like an idiot if he didn't think of a plausible excuse. And that was the last thing he wanted. Once, not long after he first entered the company, a female employee had failed to show up for work. The excuse she gave the next day when she came to the office was that she had been sick. For the next two months, all manner of crazy rumours about her spread throughout the office. Some said she took the day off to spend time with her

boyfriend, others said she went to the ob-gyn to get a ‘procedure’, and some thought she was in debt and working multiple jobs. These nasty, speculative rumours followed her around until she left the company.

Jeong-su’s office was that kind of place. If he couldn’t explain his absence today, he’d end up just like that female employee. He was respected at the office and didn’t want scandalous rumours lingering around him for the next several months. As he tried to think of an excuse, he received a text message on his phone, which he had been holding in his hand. It was from the office. He knew it was only a matter of time until someone came looking for him.

He assumed someone was demanding he come to work at once. But when he read the message, he wasn’t so sure. He stopped walking as he looked down at his cell phone.

Are you alive? Call me. Please.

This message was phrased too ambiguously for Jeong-su to know what the sender meant. Was the sender being sarcastic? Or was the sender aware that he had almost died? But how could anyone from his office know about that? *Unless . . . ?*

As Jeong-su walked back to his car, he contemplated whether he should call the sender and ask what was up. But then he saw a group of people gathering in front of the electronics store he had passed earlier.

Several people were pointing at the TV and whispering in hushed voices to each other. Jeong-su didn’t want to believe it when he saw the words ‘Breaking News’ plastered across all the TV screens in the show window.

Surely, it can't be . . .

He wished it was about politics, North Korea, anything.

'What is that thing?' the man standing closest to the television asked as he looked around at the other people.

But no one answered that question. No one could. On the TV was the black orb, slowly moving through a street.

'Move!'

People started pushing each other, and Jeong-su was thrust to the front of the crowd. From outside the crowd, he had only caught glimpses of the news broadcast, but now he could clearly see the black orb moving slowly over a deserted four-lane highway. It felt surreal seeing that large, obsidian-like orb on TV.

At the bottom of the image was a headline that read 'Monster spotted in downtown Seoul'. The orb must have travelled several kilometres from his neighbourhood to downtown. That would mean Seoul wasn't safe.

Perhaps most importantly, Jeong-su knew that what he saw last night hadn't been a hallucination.

The crowd broke out into an anxious murmur.

'What in God's name is that? Is it a monster?'

'A ghost! It must be a ghost!'

'No, it's a UFO!'

The child who cried 'UFO' seemed the most convinced, but no one listened.

Then an old man wearing a hat from the 70s yelled out in a hoarse voice:

'I bet it came down from the Communists!'

The broadcast then switched to a newscaster's face.

Someone must have turned up the volume from inside the store because they could hear it even through the glass. Several people went inside the store to watch, leaving Jeong-su with a comfortable view of the television.

‘I repeat, a monster has appeared in downtown Seoul. Police are securing the area. The monster is extremely dangerous and has already . . . Yes? Yes. I understand . . . As you can see from the video we’re about to show you . . . Oh, right. This video contains disturbing imagery. Discretion is advised . . . The footage was filmed an hour ago in Seoul and shows the mysterious creature absorbing people . . . Am I reading this right? Absorbing? It’s correct? Okay . . . Yes, I repeat, absorbing people.’

The people on the street listening to the newscaster’s incoherent report wore flustered looks.

The footage showed the black orb in the middle of a busy street. Jeong-su flinched as he watched a car almost crash into it. Moments later, the police arrived and cut off the object. They got out of their cars and opened fire on it. Each time they unloaded their guns, the bystanders covered their ears and screamed in terror. Their shots should have reached the orb, but they seemed to have no effect on it.

Because the person filming was far away from the action, it was difficult to see whether the bullets were passing through the orb, bouncing off it, or being absorbed. Undeterred, the orb continued at its unrelentingly slow pace toward the police, passing through their patrol cars and eventually reaching the officers. One policeperson

refused to run away and continued to fire at the orb, but as soon as their body made contact with the thing, they were sucked inside.

The orb started looking for its next victim. People were running or driving away if they could. The footage ended. The one holding the camera must have also decided it was time to run.

The people standing around the TV all let out terrified, anxious groans. Only Jeong-su was silent. He was the only one who wasn't witnessing this monster for the first time.

This is real. It wasn't a nightmare. It's real.

Jeong-su felt his chest tighten and his breathing quicken. The newscaster said this mysterious object was wandering downtown Seoul, that dozens of people were estimated to have been absorbed, and that police were closing the streets surrounding the orb. The newscaster also said that it was Jeong-su's neighbourhood where the orb was first spotted.

Was I the first witness?

'It's a demon! A demon has appeared in Seoul!' a random old woman screamed out as she ran across the street.

With this, the people glued to the TV quickly dispersed, as if they were startled by her screaming. Jeong-su's eyes went back and forth between his phone and the TV. The people at his office must be watching the same news. And they would have heard that the orb was first discovered near his house. His boss, colleagues, and that girl at work who was fond of him must be wondering about his

whereabouts. But that wasn't important right now. After all, he had parents to worry about.

Jeong-su quickly returned to his car. The people in the area were either frantically running around, dangerously speeding away in their cars, or staring with blank faces at the news on the television. All he had done was go out to buy a pack of cigarettes, but in that short span of time, the whole world had changed. When he got back to his car, he turned on the engine, dialled his parents, and turned on the GPS. The device was still set to the news, and when he saw the black orb appear on the screen, he couldn't help but jump in his seat.

His mother immediately picked up. She said she had been calling him, but that it kept saying the line was busy. Perhaps, he thought, the phone lines were seeing a lot of traffic. He realised he might not be able to get a hold of his parents again. He needed to take advantage of this opportunity.

'Are you safe?' his mother asked.

'Yes.'

'Thank heavens. I was so nervous when I couldn't get through. I thought my chest was going to explode. Have you seen the news? There's some monster roaming the streets of Seoul. I was worried sick because they said it was sighted in your neighbourhood. Are you home right now?'

'I'm at work.'

'Don't go back home. It's dangerous.'

She didn't need to tell him this. Even if she demanded

he go home, he wouldn't risk it. He asked if they were safe in Y City, which was a few hours outside of Seoul, and she said she wasn't sure.

'We locked all the doors and windows. Your father and I are just watching TV.'

'No!' he yelled suddenly, surprising even himself. 'It's not enough just to lock your doors. That thing can pass through walls.'

'Pass through walls? Says who?'

'I saw it with my own eyes.'

He could overhear his father in the background asking, 'He says it can pass through walls?'

'That's what Jeong-su says,' she replied. 'Heaven help us. What should we do? I'm so scared. What should we do?'

'Mum, you stand watch at the window and look to see if the monster comes. Have Dad pack the bags so you can leave if you need to. And get the car ready. I'll head right over. Pack only what you need.'

'Your office is so far away from our house. What if something happens between then and now?'

'I'll be over as soon as I can.'

Suddenly a loud noise came from over the speaker as his mother's voice faded away. He shouted into the phone several times: 'Hello? Hello?' After an anxious minute of waiting, he finally heard her voice again.

'A tank just passed by the back of the house.'

The loud noise must have been the sound of the tank rumbling through the street.

‘A tank?’ he asked in surprise.

‘Yes, we must be at war. What are we going to do? This is crazy! What should we do?’

‘They must be headed to fight the orb. I hope they get there in time.’

He tried to calm his mother, but it wasn’t working. Finally, his father took the phone from her and told her to stop freaking out. He and his father, now talking on the phone, agreed not to hang up. Jeong-su connected a hands-free headset and was about to step on the gas when he looked at the windshield. He couldn’t believe it. A parking ticket was stuck to the glass.

‘What asshole gave me a ticket at a time like this?’

Jeong-su got out of the car, took the parking ticket, and threw it on the ground. People and cars were starting to pour out into the sidewalks and streets. If he didn’t hurry, he would get stuck in traffic. Jeong-su quickly got back into the car and took off.

He remembered what the newscaster had said. The first sightings of the black orb had been reported to his neighbourhood police station. He was there, but he hadn’t reported it. He remembered now that he had tried to call the police but couldn’t remember their number. And because he was only focused on escaping from the neighbourhood, he had completely forgotten about making a report.

But why had he spent the entire night cowering in his car instead of calling the police? He had called everyone, his family, his friends. The only people he hadn’t called

were the police. Why? Had he called them, he could have saved dozens of lives.

Why didn't I call?

He was asking himself this question but had no answer.

Office

TO K, IT WAS A MONDAY morning like any other. Things were moving slowly enough that he even had time to contemplate what he would have for lunch. But just before lunch, rumours of something strange happening in downtown Seoul started spreading through the office. Everyone gathered around the TV in the lounge to watch the breaking news.

‘A black orb that absorbs people?’

Even as he looked at the footage of the black orb, which had appeared near his office building, he still couldn’t believe it. From the window of the office, he saw cars crashing into each other on a busy street as people tried to run away from the orb, and police quarantining the area and shooting at the orb in vain. He even saw the orb absorb a police officer. And still, he couldn’t believe his eyes.

Most of K’s colleagues evacuated the building and fled after they witnessed these events. Only when K saw the

people running out of the building did he realise how dire the situation was.

I should have run with them.

Initially, K had stayed at the office because he didn't want to leave work without permission. But then the police came and ordered everyone to stay inside, making it impossible for K to leave even if he wanted to.

K and his colleagues all pleaded with the police to let them go home, but it was no use. According to the police, all hell would break loose if people started running out of the building. They were probably right. A large group running out of the building in different directions could cause the orb to start moving in an unpredictable way.

As they continued to watch the news from inside the building, they learned more and more about the mysterious black orb. First was the physical description of the object: black, spherical, and about two metres in diameter. But there was no one who could attest to whether the orb was made from hard metal, like it appeared to be. After all, everyone who had touched its surface was sucked inside. Later, it was confirmed that the orb moved at a slow speed of about 4 kilometres per hour, never speeding up or slowing down except to change direction. Eye-witness accounts of physically impossible behaviours, such as passing through walls, were also reported.

And, perhaps most importantly, was the theory that the orb only pursued people.

The news explained that the orb followed humans like a predator stalking its prey, and always pursued the

human that was closest to it. If someone came closer to the orb, then it would change direction and start following them instead.

As soon as this was confirmed, someone came up with the idea to lure the orb away from people and keep it in one area. They suggested having one person stay in front of the orb and run away from it slowly, like the way a mother lark lures a fox away from her nest.

The police put this plan into action, and for the last several hours, the black orb had been circling the perimeter of K's office building in pursuit of the slowly moving patrol vehicle they were using as bait.

'The police should be trying to get rid of that thing, not playing cat and mouse,' someone grumbled. 'Do they really expect us to wait here forever like this?'

'We're going to have to make a break for it eventually. Thankfully the orb is slow. They said on the news that it moves at about walking speed. If we run, we should be able to outpace it. The police should know this, too. I don't know why they need to lock us up in here.'

'I wish I was a marathon runner. I could keep running for hours and never be caught.'

The person who said this was trying to make light of the situation, but no one was laughing.

'I envy the people who fled earlier. I'm sick of waiting here. I didn't even get lunch.'

Everyone nodded in agreement, even K. The people who had escaped before the police took control of the building would have reached safety by now.

I wish I had run with them. Why didn't I? Why wasn't I quicker?

There were several people whom no one had seen in hours. They must have made it through the police barricade, but how they got through, no one knew.

'If they got out, they should have called to tell us how they did it. I can't believe they saved only themselves and left the rest of us here like this.'

The sun was already starting to set. It seemed like they were going to miss dinner and be forced to stay the night. K remembered that his biggest concern earlier that day was what he was going to eat for lunch. He almost laughed out loud at the absurdity of it. No one could have guessed that something like this was going to happen today.

'What's that sound?'

The entire building was sent shaking by a deafening sound, as though someone had thrown a brick in a washing machine. A few female workers started screaming. Realizing it was the sound of something large moving through the street, K ran out into the hallway and toward the window. He felt relieved when he saw the source of the sound.

'It's a tank!' someone shouted. 'They've brought a tank!'

K knew it was technically called self-propelled artillery, but he didn't correct them.

News of the 'tank' quickly spread through the office, and soon everyone was gathered in the hallway and looking out of the window.

'I guess they're going to use a tank on it. They should

have done that in the first place instead of locking us in here.’

Everyone agreed with this. Once it was confirmed that handheld guns were ineffective, they should have brought out the bigger guns. Even online, people questioned why the military wasn’t trying larger weapons or explosives, like rocket launchers and grenades. It seemed like the government had finally responded to public pressure.

Everyone watched nervously as the tank approached the orb. K’s heart was racing as he stared at the orb moving through the street. Because it was perfectly round and didn’t have dark or light patches, it was impossible to tell whether the orb was rolling or gliding across the earth. He felt like his eyes would start hurting if he continued to stare at it. K wanted, even if just for a minute, to be by himself where there was no stress, no worries, no mysterious orbs he couldn’t understand.

Once the tank was close enough, the police car that the orb was chasing accelerated and distanced itself from it. The orb immediately changed direction and started moving toward the tank. K got goosebumps all over his body. The orb had switched targets.

K was worried about the safety of the soldiers inside, who, for all he knew, could be high-ranking generals or lowly foot soldiers. But the other people in the hallway only seemed to care about when the tank was going to fire. They started muttering among themselves as the tank just stood there doing nothing, even though the orb was getting closer.

‘Why aren’t they firing?’

‘Just blow it up already so I can go home!’

‘It’s getting too close. If they fire now, the tank will blow up too.’

‘Why are they just standing there and not firing?’

Then, as if answering their prayers, a missile was discharged from the barrel of the tank. The shell hit the surface of the orb, letting out a terrifying explosion. The windows of the building lurched as though they were going to shatter, and people covered their ears and screamed.

K was the first one to open his eyes.

He saw smoke hovering over the asphalt. The orb was still stubbornly moving toward the tank.

‘It didn’t do anything . . .’ K muttered to himself.

The black orb didn’t have a single scratch on it. It hadn’t even been blown off course. It passed through the tank’s thick armour and came out the other side. As it went through, K winced. He even thought he heard the soldiers’ screams.

Without its driver, the tank veered off the road and crashed into a building. As K watched the wall of the building collapse and the tank roll over, the rest of the people in the hallway started to slowly step back from the window. K turned around to look at them, and when he looked back toward the window, he saw the orb start flying toward him through the air.

He was stunned. He never imagined the orb could fly.

How could such a large object move through the air so effortlessly? K wanted to follow the people who were running away screaming, but his legs just wouldn’t move.

He was only able to start running when the orb was just outside the eleventh-storey window. The orb passed through the glass and continued toward K.

Now that he had a closer look at it, K was struck by just how perfectly black and round the orb was. K ran into the office from the hallway, but the orb passed through the wall and followed him into the room.

K realised that he had made a huge mistake running in here. Now, he had nowhere else to run.

He hurried over to the window, opened the latch, and squeezed his shoulder through the opening. This window was the one he came to on breaks to stare up at the sky or down at people and cars.

Who knew I would end up hanging out of this window like this?

Even as he squeezed his torso through the window and perched his butt on the ledge, the black orb continued to advance toward him. He looked for an escape route, but there was nothing on the building wall for him to grab on to, no way to jump to a higher or lower floor.

K blamed himself as he felt the hot summer wind raging along the side of the building.

Why didn't I flee earlier? I wouldn't be hanging from a window like this had I come to my senses earlier and run with everyone else.

Darkness was falling, and all over the city, streetlights and neon signs were flickering on.

Here I am, staring death in the face, and yet the world is still going round.

K felt like he was about to cry. The black orb was now just feet away from him. Finally building up the courage to jump from the window, K let go of the ledge and lunged into the air.

As he fell from the eleventh floor to the asphalt below, he prayed that he might miraculously survive. After all, that sometimes happened: people falling dozens of storeys only to be snatched out of the air by a streetlamp or shop sign.

Who knows? Something like that might happen to me.

But nothing like that happened to K.

Road

JEONG-SU WATCHED ON TV AS a man running from the orb jumped off a tall building to his death. He turned away just before the man hit the ground. He never imagined they would show something like this on the news. But then again, he never imagined any of this would happen.

When the orb first appeared in downtown Seoul, the news media relayed the government's orders for everyone to evacuate to the outskirts of the city as quickly as possible. Jeong-su thought he had a head start, but once the roads became jammed, he was in the same predicament as everyone else. He had already been sitting in his car for several hours not moving, and soon he turned off his engine just like everyone else around him.

According to the news, even though the tank was unable to quell the orb, the police were able to catch the orb's attention again and now had it circling the same area as before. The newscaster said everyone was safe for now. But were they really?