

# The Short Path

By Miguel Q. Malisa

## I

Is it really that bad to use an emergency exit for a reason other than an escape route for emergencies? What could go wrong if a person opens that metal door and uses it as a fast exit instead of going through the trouble to walk to the front door of the building? Nothing, I would assume. Those were the thoughts I had after I received an urgent phone call from a work colleague. I was inside the fifth floor of a hospital in due for my monthly check-up, sitting on a chair waiting for my name to get called by the staff. Suddenly, because of that one phone call, I changed my priorities immediately as if it was all instinct. I needed to get to work as fast as I possibly could, but the nearest exit was about five minutes away, and considering how many people were using the elevator, leaving in five minutes was but a hazy dream; I didn't have such precious time to waste. I needed to get to work ASAP. That was just the nature of my field of work. Truly an emergency.

I hastily got up from my seat and rushed towards the emergency exit with such speed that all the other people in the area were alarmed. Confused stares gathered on my back, amazed by my swiftness and puzzled by my sudden action. It was only until the loud creak of an iron door reached their ears and saw my figure fling open the door, did they understand my intentions. I was about to use the emergency exit for my own convenience. Some didn't care while others were repulsed by my selfish actions, but even they didn't do anything to stop me. They simply stared at me with disgust as I rushed outside and exited with a loud bang as nature blew the door shut for me.

They wouldn't understand, I said to myself as I thought back on the plethora of sharp stares that silently judged me. There was no way for normal people like them to understand my actions. They had no idea just how important my work is. Why were they so bothered with me using the emergency exit anyway? It's a doorway like any other that the staff uses to conveniently move around the building. Why must they judge me for using it? Is it because I was simply a normal person to their eyes? Perhaps. Perhaps they were judging me for taking the closest way out while they and all the other people have to go through the trouble of finding their way to the proper exit. But I'm different, this is an actual emergency. They wouldn't understand.

Those were the thoughts I had as I jumped off the side of the building and disappeared in midair. I was off to work, to save others in need from those they don't understand. But now, looking back at it, I was just giving myself excuses. I didn't take into consideration that the exit

could've been protected with an alarm. That door wasn't connected to an alarm, but I didn't take into consideration the trouble I could've caused by taking the easiest way out. I'm ashamed of myself, for it wasn't until a similar event happened, did I realize this fact.

## II

A few months have passed after that happened. Currently, I am inside a van riding on a commute back to my hometown where I was commissioned to perform my work. Lucban, Quezon. It is a peaceful town in the Philippines where their crimes and accidents were scarce in comparison to the big cities like Manila.

I've had a lot of memories of that place, making me quite fond of it. I haven't even gotten to the town yet, but I'm already reminiscing my childhood as I watch the familiar roads and scenery pass by outside the van's window. I don't consider myself an emotional person, but coming back to my hometown after seven years sure is surreal. I can't wait to see how my family and the others are doing.

The time quickly flew by as I absentmindedly remind myself of the past and try to guess the numerous possibilities of my family and friends' present state. Before I knew it, I was already in Lucban and all I had to do left is wait for my stop, however, I decided to step out of the van early. I wanted to see how much the town had changed since I was last here, not inside a metallic box through the transparent panes of glass, but instead with my own two eyes with the fresh air flowing in my lungs and the cool breeze brushing through my hair. I put the weight on my legs as I continue to walk through the town on my way back to my family's home.

The town was almost the same as seven years ago. All that was truly different was the new stores and the newly widened bridge that began its construction long before I left for my independence. Almost nothing was new to the town, but strangely enough, it felt like everything around me was fresh. It was a novel experience to walk around this peaceful town. I was nearing my turn to my parent's house, but I caught myself standing still raising my head to the sky. The sun was shining its radiant light at me, preventing me from looking at it directly. It was nearing its apex, but it hasn't reached it yet. I don't bother taking the phone out of my pocket as I have a rough estimate that it was about an hour before midday. With that in mind, I decided to take my luggage and pass the turn, looking to explore the town a bit more.

After visiting a few places on the way, I reached the local supermarket. As I expected, nothing much had changed, but it was still nice to see this place was still standing strong. The countless customers walking around inside were proof of that. As I was about to visit my next destination, I was stopped in my tracks as someone called out to me.

“Hey! Zen, is that you!?”

“Oh, why hello there, Mrs. Gina. It’s been a while since we’ve last seen each other.”

“Indeed, it has! I didn’t know you were in town! Ah, how about we throw a celebration party? You know, just seven years ago you were this normal teenager that was so enthusiastic about going to college and experiencing the world for your own. But look at you now, you’re a lot taller, hair is slicked back, you have sharp-looking glasses, and toned muscles, you’ve seriously changed! Now you’re like this mature youngin you’d see in the movies!”

This is Mrs. Gina, a neighbor from our last house from when I was a child. She’s a cheery housewife that’s quick to throw parties for celebrations no matter how small the case. There was even a time where she invited us over because her son was old enough to handle a smartphone. Remembering that memory reminded me of how annoying she could be, but having such innocent reasons prevented me to hate her, so I let out an awkward laugh before denying her proposal.

“Haha... There’s no need for that Mrs. Gina, I only got the chance to stop by since it’s a part of work. I would only be for a week at most.”

“Oh, well that’s too bad... Wait, but didn’t you say your job was a scientist? What are you doing all the way over here?”

“Its field research, Mrs. Gina. I’ll be staying at our farm to collect some data about something.”

“Is that so? Well, good luck with that, I’m sure it must be hard.”

“Oh, why thank you.”

Mrs. Gina raises her arm and takes a quick check on her wristwatch.

“Oh my, look at the time. Sorry, Zen, I need to buy some ingredients for lunch. It’s been nice talking to you again. Well then, take care.”

“You too ma’am, goodbye.”

With that, she turns her back and heads inside the supermarket. I take the phone out of my pocket and realize it's already 11:45. I should head for home now but before that, I make one last stop. A few minutes walk from the local supermarket, I arrive at a café. The place was starting to fill up as over half the tables had already been taken.

I walk up to the bar and take a seat. In front of me was the back of a fine gentleman with short black hair skillfully handling the water kettle as he brews the coffee. He wore a chic uniform, donning a white long-sleeve polo under a black vest with subtle white stripes, as well as a brown

apron wrapped from the waist down covering part of his black pants. He radiated an aura of elegance and respect as he silently finished his work.

“Yo, looks like business is taking off, huh?”

I call out to the man. Hearing my voice seemed to have surprised him as his head slightly flicked as I made myself apparent. Slowly turning to me, he spoke.

“Why, what a surprise. I didn’t know you were in town.”

This is the master of the café as well as my friend, Chris. He has been my friend since high school and now, he’s finally reached his dream of operating a café and brewing high-quality coffee behind the bar.

“Of course, you wouldn’t. I’m only here because of a job, after all. I’d be too busy working at other places to have time to leisurely visit.”

“So you say, but you have breaks, don’t you? The problem isn’t that you don’t have time, it’s that you chose to put that time into more work.”

Chris talks familiarly of my job. That is because he is the only person in this town that knows its true nature. I return with a witty remark.

“Says the café master that barely closes his shop in a single year.”

“Lay off, Zen. You know this is basically my pass time.”

“Well, same here. There’s too much in this world we haven’t understood yet, and I’m going to uncover its mysteries!”

“As enthusiastic as ever, huh? Well, be careful with your ‘*scientist*’ work.”

He then pours a cup of coffee and presents it to me.

“Here, have a cup before you go.”

“This is on the house, right?”

He gives me a huge ominous smirk as he answers.

“Heh, keep dreaming.”

“U-Ugh... Not even a day after I got back and I’m already being swindled of my money.”

I say in jest. I passed the time by making small talk with Chris as I sipped away on the coffee, talking about our experiences in the last seven years. After about ten minutes, I take my leave and head for my family’s home.

I walk under the blazing sun at high noon, naturally producing sweat and making an uncomfortable sensation of my wet shirt sticking to my back. Although it was a bit awkward I bear with it until finally, I arrive at the house. As I'm raising my hand to ring the doorbell, the door bursts open followed by a loud shout.

"You're back, Brother Zen!"

The owner of the sharp scream was my little sister, Jane. She is 12 years of age and stood about 3 and a half feet tall. She tends to be rambunctious at times perhaps because of her young age but she is a nice person that tries to do what she thinks is right.

"Hello, Jane! Long time, no see!"

"Brother Zen! Brother Zen!"

She excitedly jumps and gives me a hug and I return the gesture. From inside the house comes my mother and father, greeting me with happy smiles plastered on their faces.

"Welcome back, son."

"Oh, my boy! It's good to see you again!"

I can't help but curve my lips into a smile from their warm welcome. After exchanging greetings, I enter the house and sit on the living room sofa with my luggage placed beside me.

"Oh, Zen! Your back is all sweaty! Come on, get a change of clothes or else you'll get sick!"

"..."

My mother was worried for my well-being, I know that and without a doubt, my shirt sticking to my back is much displeasing, but I couldn't help but get slightly irked by her words. *Leaving your sweat to dry will get you sick*, they often say. But I know for a fact such a belief is only a Filipino superstition, a baseless warning.

"Don't worry, mother. I was planning on doing just that. And just to remind you, leaving sweat to dry doesn't get you sick."

"Oh, not this again. Come on, hurry up and change!"

I tried to correct her, multiple times in the past in fact, but she still refuses to listen. On my end, I decide not to pursue the topic. Since I was a child, I was much restricted and annoyed by the number of superstitions my family was mistaking for something factual.

Washing your hands or taking a shower after tiring out your body will cause pasma, it is bad to comb your hair at night, it is bad to cut hair and fingernails after sundown, one must excuse themselves when passing through an anthill or else spirits will play tricks on them, and even

more! I can remember every single one of them. And hearing a single one quickly ticks me off. To me, they are just spreading misinformation.

However, I know better and control the urge to get upset over it. These are Filipino superstitions, a large part of our culture. Because of that, I taught myself to not force my own beliefs upon other people, and so should vice versa. Unfortunately, I still have the urge to correct people at least once, but I never forced it any further than that. It is the Filipino culture. If everyone else decides to preserve that culture by spreading superstitions, I will not complain, but I will stay firm in my own beliefs.

Quickly extinguishing the flames to correct my mother, I take out a spare shirt and change. After that, they told me to unpack at my old room but I refused. As unfortunate as it is, I didn't have time to waste. I've been taking it easy since earlier, but that's because my job starts at night. So, I request them for the keys to our farmhouse. It wasn't strange that their lively voices toned down and their faces solemn when they heard what I said.

"Zen, I don't think it's a good time right now. Lately, there have been reports of murders at night in that area. I haven't visited the farm for a week now and there have been no signs of it slowing down. You should stay here until they resolve the situation. I know it's a bother for your work, but I'm sure they'll understand."

My father brings up a reasonable excuse to stop me from my work. No one in their right mind would head into work when they know there's a murderer on the loose. Normally, I would've followed my father's suggestion. I would like to spend some quality time with the family as well. That would have been the case if my job didn't involve resolving the murders.

I promptly reject their idea and insisted that I go. Worry and uncertainty decorated their faces. Is it truly fine for parents to send their child out to a murder hotspot? Of course not. But their troubled faces are telling me that they don't want to hold me back from pursuing my job. So, I give one last push to convince them.

"It's alright. I didn't tell you, but I learned some self-defense while I was away. I can take care of myself even if they have a knife or a gun. Not to mention, I actually have a gun license now so there's no need to be afraid."

I pull out the said license from my wallet and show them to my parents. They were surprised to suddenly know that their son learned how to handle a firearm without their knowledge, but seeing the determination in me as I look at them straight in the eyes, they cave in and reluctantly gave me their permission. However, there was still one who disagreed.

"No! Come on, Brother Zen! Stay and play with me! Don't go to someplace dangerous!"

Jane pulled my arm with all her strength as she said so, making her feet slip in place but not a budge on my body. I tried to calm her down and explain how my job is important and I had no choice but to go. So, she responded the only way she knew how.

“Brother Zen you idiot! I hate you!”

She screamed at me as she hid behind our mother who was sitting on a couch opposite of me. Understandably, she was still young and selfish, but I didn’t mind that. The day will come for her to understand my actions.

We have lunch together with the food my parents prepared, but the whole time, Jane was still upset. Mother and Father tried to calm her down but none of it worked. After which, I tried to calm her down on my own while the sun was still up, but I was unsuccessful to the very end. With a sigh escaping my breath, I head to our farmhouse.

The sun had set and the night sky wrapped the area with its veil of darkness. I finally arrive at the farmhouse after I ate dinner on my way here. It’s time to begin work, but first I need to store my belongings in the house. Metal clangs and rattles as I turn the locks with the keys my parents gave me. With a creak, the gate opened, allowing me to unlock the front door but as turn the key to unlock it, I sense a strange sensation and leap backward away from the door at incredible speed. Not a second later, the door slammed open outwards at the very spot I was just standing with so much force it bent the gate. It doesn’t take a person like me to know that it wasn’t natural. The door only opens inwards, after all. This was the doing of a spirit.

I quickly open my backpack and take out a machete and a pouch of marbles. Ready myself, I rush inside the house. As I was about to cross the doorframe, the broken hinges on it creaked and the door abruptly flung towards me, detaching from its metallic bind on the doorframe, but I was already long gone from that location. In the blink of an eye, I enter the dark farmhouse and spot a woman with long, mucky hair, tattered clothes, and glowing red eyes piercing through my body with her ominous gaze. I could recognize this deranged-looking spirit anywhere. It’s a bruha. Spirits that use spells on humans, and typically thought of as witches or wizards. This one seemed to have made this it's home while no one was occupying it.

The bruha lets out an ear-piercing screech as it jumped around the room in madness and touching the furniture all the while. I can sense it is preparing a spell of some sort. I need to stop it now. I take out a few marbles from my pouch and threw them in the air, intercepting the bruha’s insane jumping. Without care, it continued, resulting in it getting caught in the middle of multiple explosions.

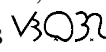
It let out another maddening screech, letting its pain be known. While it was still in the middle of trying to recover from the pain, I jump in the air in order to kill it before it had the

chance to make another attack. I landed on the air as if I was floating and begin to hack and slash at her until I confirmed she is dead. It ended up screeching to the very last second, its dead body falling lifelessly to the ground, and slowly disintegrating into nothingness.

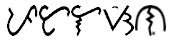
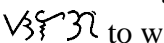
My job is a scientist. I have uttered no lies. The question comes as to what kind of scientist I am. I engage in a branch of science that only a handful knows of. Apocrology—the study of mysteries—comes from the Greek words (απόκρυφος) “arcane” referring to the supernatural and its mysteries and (λογία) “logy” meaning “study of.” It is a branch of science that studies the supernatural and everything related to it. While combining science and the supernatural may seem contradictory, the only reason most deem the supernatural as baseless superstition is because it is beyond their understanding. However, there have been people with the power to understand this stretching from the beginning of time. One of those people is me. An apocrologist that engages with the supernatural, a scientist of the shadows, an occupation under the public eyes.

Those few people who become apocrologist tend to discover about the supernatural at a young age. In most of these cases, people begin seeing spirits caused by unlocking the control of one’s “spirit flow”—the life force of humans. This life force is needed for humans to be able to fend against spirits. Just like what I performed earlier, high-speed dashes under a blink, exploding marbles, and body suspension in mid-air are all because of controlling my spirit flow.

Although I *am* a scientist, I sometimes get commissioned to extermination jobs like the one I’m on right now, which is normally taken care of by a different faction called *hunters*. This is because of the short-handedness of the group I work for. There are actually quite a lot of people who work in the shadows as I do, but there are just too many spirit cases for us to handle. Despite being scientists, everyone under our secret society follows one motto: “Become the shield of those unknowing, and spearhead through the mysteries of the shroud unbeknownst to us.” My job is to discover the mysteries of this world and learn how the supernatural functions, but I cannot ignore the killings of the spirits. I *did* kill a spirit just now, but this was not the killer around these parts since *bruhas* are territorial and usually live in confined spaces which means they don’t kill incessantly for no reason. I need to find the true killer before the casualty toll goes up.

I finish storing my belongings in the farmhouse and arm myself. I put on a jet-black cloak embellished with blue lines, a kind of armor that has a defense against spirits and multiple features that allow me to hide my tools and weapons. I then equip my specialized boots, attach a combat belt with all my other equipment preattached to it, and refill the bag of marbles I used earlier. It could be seen that the marbles had characters  carved in them, characters from a Philippine script called Baybayin. These symbols allow me to transfer my spirit power in them and have them act as I want. These marbles, specifically, explode on command, embedded with



the characters “explode.” Incidentally, my other weapons including the machete I used earlier also have baybayin characters embedded in them with different effects. From the base of the blade, the characters  could be seen, meaning “sharpen,” allowing me to sharpen my blade whenever I want. Having prepared myself, I temporarily place a piece of paper on the door with the symbols  to ward off spirits and humans from the farmhouse. Just to be sure, I barricade the entrance with nearby furniture and head out into the night, jumping from tree to tree to catch a good view of the area.

I make a quick patrol of the area and see no signs of any spirits with malicious intent. There were other spirits present, but they were not hostile. Normal humans fear them, but most spirits mean no harm and mind their own business. In fact, I’ve made friends with spirits before in some of my missions. If spirits were as hostile as they are made up to be in stories, then I would have no doubt that the human race would already be extinct, if not, then we would be pushed to the brink of it.

Confirming that the area was clear of hostile spirits after another round of patrolling, I return to the ground and draw a circle with my fingers. To others, I look like a suspicious individual playing with the dirt, but with my unlocked senses, I can see the flow of spirit power in the air. As I’m drawing a circle, a blue trail traces my finger; it is the hardened form of my spirit power. This power has a lot of uses, but I need to be careful. I can regenerate missing spirit power, but if I completely deplete my reserves, I will die. As spirit power represents a being’s life force, I am killing myself as I use this, but it is the only way for us to fight against spirits, so there must be extra caution for using this.

I finish the circle and stand inside it, not a second later, my surroundings change from a dark-veiled night to a luminous night space. The trees, grass, dirt, and buildings remain in the same exact place, but instead of being covered in darkness, every object around me began radiating in a pale green light. To add to that, small glowing particles float around the environment as if it were snowing. I look up and see a pitch-black sky. In this place, it is always night with no stars, sun, or moon, but despite that, the radiant glowing of all the objects makes it seem like the brightest day, it is as if I’m inside a cave with numerous glowing crystals. Another interesting discovery of this place is despite it having no day and night cycle, the concept of night and day remains the same as earth, affecting every spirit differently depending on the time.

This is called the Spirit Realm, the place where all the spirits reside. It may not seem like it from the identical surroundings, but this place is a different world. Its oxygen levels are the same as earth's, so there is no need for a special spacesuit. Although we do know this is a different world, we have no idea where it is located, but of course, that is a job for us apocrologists to unearth that mystery.

After being mesmerized by the Spirit Realm once again, I turn back to my current objective—finding the elusive killer. I patrol the area on the same route I took on earth and encounter more spirits kapres, local diwatas, sarangays, and tikbalangs. They’ve been fabled to be hostile to humans, but in reality, they can think properly like humans and don’t see us as a source of food. I politely catch their attention and ask for any clues but I end up with nothing.

I continue my search in the night until I reach 6 am of the next day, having nothing accomplished, I cut my losses. Tired and depressed, I return to the farmhouse to eat the meal I got for take-out before I came here and fix the front entrance with my tools along with the convenience of spirit power to restore the door before taking a nice, long sleep on the dusty mattress. I thought about how unhygienic this was, in spite of that, I continue to drown myself in drowsiness and let my heavy eyelids close for some well-deserved rest.

### III

“N-nnm?”

I slowly regain my consciousness as my heavy eyes catch sight of the farmhouse interior with a small television, speakers, a table, and a few chairs surrounding it, the scent of dust wafting through the air. I reclaim my senses and catch a rough sensation under my body. Staring upwards toward the ceiling, I spot the wood deteriorating, most likely caused by termites. It is quite clear to me the maintenance my parents performed in the time I was gone. My parents said that they haven’t been here for a week because of the murders, but I can’t help but wonder how the place got like this in over a week.

I rise groggily from the mattress and spot the rays of sunlight penetrating through the small gaps of the sliding windows, based on its brightness, it’s sometime around noon. I turn my head to the table where I kept my luggage, the one wide-open collecting dust contained the tools I used earlier to patrol the area. Thinking about it clearly, I did something dangerous. A common burglar or a random spirit could just take my equipment under my nose, and I’m more than certain the higher-ups won’t accept my tiredness as an excuse. I repent internally and open a few windows to air out the house.

“Oh, Zen, is that you!?”

As I’m opening the windows I hear a familiar voice call out to me.

“Mrs. Gina? Why are you here?”

“Oh, you must be surprised, aren’t you? Well, while you were gone we decided to start on a farm as well. We own the land over there landmarked by a small shelter made from bamboo and leaves.”

She points behind her, toward the north. Looking at her carefully, she was wearing light clothing, a pair of boots, and a large straw hat, the staple attire for traversing the rough and muddy geographical features of farmland.

“I came here to see if you were home. You said you were coming here, after all. Looks like I was right.”

“That you are, Mrs. Gina. I wish I could offer you something to drink but it looks like we’re a bit lacking in the snacks department. Why don’t you come in and take a quick rest?”

“Oh, why thank you.”

I hurry downstairs and unlock the newly fixed door and gate to welcome Mrs. Gina. We have a nice chat over a few glasses of water to rehydrate ourselves. As shameful as it is, we have no other drinks in this house. While chatting, it crossed my mind there was a possibility that she might know something about the recent murders. If she lives in the area then she would know a lot more than I do. With that thought in mind, I bring it up to her.

“Mrs. Gina, I heard there were murders around the area, do you know anything about them?”

My sudden topic change seemed to have surprised her as her eyes widen on me, but soon she rummages through her memories to answer me, making a pondering face to prove that.

“Let’s see... It’s true that there have been murders, but I’m not particularly afraid of them.”

At first, I thought the reason she showed no fear treading the farmlands alone was that it’s daytime, but it was soon clear to me that it wasn’t the case.

“For a while now, people of the area said to never approach the river on the west, mostly at night. They say that going there will lead to your death. People who ignore their warning will hear a calming tune of a flute and die later at night. It’s a cursed land, apparently.”

My face twists in a slight grimace as I hear her explanation, she takes notice of this. From what it sounded like, it’s another superstition, a topic I tend to dislike. Despite that, I continue to listen.

“Oh, I bet you think I’m lying! Just so you know, most of the murders in the area happened around the lake. They probably ignored our warning and went there, thinking it was just a joke but look at where they are now, buried in the ground as corpses!”

“I-I see... I’ll take note of that, Mrs. Gina.”

I am a bit taken aback by how brutally she worded that. I assume she's quite adamant about the things she hears, that being, superstitions. I entertain Mrs. Gina a bit more before she finally left for home. With my abrupt visitor gone, make a quick meal, I close the windows, grab my equipment, and lock the door. The time is about 3 pm and my destination is the river of the west.

Currently, I am hunting my prey using a superstition, the concept which I dislike. Some would call me hypocritical, but that is only because they do not know the true nature of superstitions. These ideas are only misunderstandings of what is truly happening. The true reason why it is bad to wash hands or take a shower with a tired body, the true reason for pasma, as well as other superstitions Filipinos create, is because of the spirits.

Spirits have various ways to gain power. One of these options is collecting emotions from humans. It is a major coincidence that humans get sick from spirits parasitizing them for their own power. These coincidences happened multiple times over and over until most of us are convinced these superstitions are true. Although I do not want to destroy our culture of superstitions, I will not let spirits take advantage of others and mask themselves with lies. It sickens me to the core. The true reason why I dislike superstitions. And in this case, this superstition will lead me to the murders.

I catch the quiet sound of running water with my sharpened senses under the sound of rustling leaves as I rush through the field. I reach the area described by Mrs. Gina. Unlike the other rivers and masses of water I've seen in the farmland, it flows a clean stream with see-through water. The ground it flows on is covered in rocks with not a single piece of trash or human pollution. It is quite a rare sight, but with no sign of the spirit, not even the sound of a flute.

Having cleared the area, I return to the riverbank. There wasn't a single sight of a spirit in the human world, so I draw a circle on the ground to patrol the spirit realm, the world of spirits. I take out my machete before stepping on the middle of the circle. I still have no idea what I'm facing, and it was very much a possibility that a spirit will attack me the moment I arrive at the spirit realm. With a deep breath, I step into the circle.

My surroundings change at rapid speed and my eyes adjust to the environment from the sunny rays of the afternoon sun to the crystal-cave-like darkness of the spirit realm. I quickly search my surroundings and I spot no spirits after my head. This is a good sign. Suddenly, the melancholic tune of a flute resonates within my ears. Despite its calming tone, it set off alarms in my head and it didn't take long for me to realize that the sound was coming directly behind me. I hurriedly leap away in a panic and twist my body in mid-air to face the source of the flute.

My eyes then land on a female spirit the size of a small child. She had a short bob haircut and wore a plain one-piece dress. On her bare feet, she stood on the rocks of the riverbank and

ignored me as she continued to play her tune. Although she presented herself as harmless, I didn't let my guard down and brandished my blade toward the young lady.

"You, what are you doing here?!"

I speak in a threatening tone to catch her attention, but she keeps her eyes closed and continues to blow on her apparatus. I warily observe her and keep my distance, ready for any surprise attack she throws on me. If she doesn't plan on talking, then I'll strike her where she stands. I make the threat in my mind and take a look at her every movement, making sure that they aren't trying to catch me off guard with a trap.

Spirits have only one weak point—their core. It is a ball of their spirit power compressed into a single sphere. Although it may sound like I only need to stab them in the chest with my weapon, spirits have the ability to move their core around their body, making it hard for us to finish them off. It is also the reason why I swung my machete barbarically at the bruha I encountered yesterday. Not to mention that they have the power to mold their body however they want as long as they don't reduce further than their normal form.

I take note of the spirit's size. If this is her true form, then I have to keep in mind that she can enter small spaces in the event she attempts to escape. Getting a bit impatient, I shout another warning at the spirit, but only to leave me with familiar silence riddled with heavy tension in the air.

Three minutes have passed and I am done assessing the spirit. I prepared the items I need, calculated the resources I require to take her down and ran multiple simulations in my head in the event she tries to fight me, which is nothing short of inevitable.

I say that because of the amount of spirit power the spirit possesses. Typically, spirits wear their power and emotions on their sleeves, meaning that it is highly detectable simply by looking at them. From what I can see, the spirit is bathed in a thick flame as if it were being burned alive. Although no one sees this, that is how I sense its power, meaning this spirit gathered an ample amount of power, most likely from murdering humans.

However, contradicting this is the purity of its flame. It burns in a bright hue of the clear sky, showing innocence and its untainted state, which makes me second-guess myself if I truly have the spirit responsible for the murders in front of me.

She doesn't seem to acknowledge me, so I decide to make a warning strike. But just as I was about to take the attack, she finishes her melody and brings down her flute. She heaves a heavy sigh before turning to me, staring at me blankly. Suddenly, her plain, expressionless eyes widen as if they were struck by a thunderbolt and her mouth gapes like the radiant crack of dawn.

“Zenith!”

“H-Huh!?”

She was like a gust of wind. Without warning, in a span of a quick moment, she erased the distance between us and wraps me tight in her embrace, weaving through the traps I erected and under the sharp deadly glare of my blade. I didn’t even have the time to react. I was certain that if she wanted to have me dead, I would be bathing in the pool of my own blood a few seconds ago, losing consciousness with only the troubled thoughts of her breakneck speed. Realizing that, I begin to sweat profusely as I stare at the spirit girl locking me in her arms, completely nonplussed.

“Zenith! It’s you!”

Calm down. I am a member of a secret society, its scientist, and a part-time hunter that protects innocent people under the incomprehensible threat of the supernatural. Seeing a large ravine between our power is completely normal. I need to collect myself.

“Z-Zenith, you say? Are... Are you talking about me...?”

“Yeah! You’re Zenith! It’s been a long time since we saw each other!”

The spirit girl talks with a spring in her step, slowly draining the great tension from the realization that I could have died. At any rate, it doesn’t seem like she has the intent to kill me, if anything else, she seems to be under the impression that I am someone she knew in the past. I dread to think about what would happen once she realizes that she’s wrong.

“Z-Zenith... yeah, that’s me. Well? What could you be doing in a place like this?”

“Ah! I was practicing my flute, would you like to hear it?”

She stares at me with a beaming smile and burning enthusiasm. She is rather keen on making me listen to her music, but it could also be a trap as some spirits catch their victims from making others listen to music. If that were truly the case, then that could explain how she was able to close our distance in a blink of an eye. I spent too much time setting up traps that I got caught by her power.

“A flute, huh...? Maybe... I should pass right now. I don’t quite feel like it.”

“Oh, is that so? Then, come with me! A lot has changed since we last met!”

The thought of letting go and running away crossed my mind. But even after coming face to face with my death, I am still on a mission. If I run away then who will protect the innocent people? If I am a member of this secret society, then why am I not taking this opportunity? With those thoughts in mind, I renew my resolve. If this spirit truly is responsible for the deaths, then I

need to find her weakness, and if not, I can try to get her to help me. After assessing my options, I let the spirit girl drag me by the hand with my guard up for any surprise attacks all the while.

From the far outskirts of the farmland, we arrive at the heart of town which is bustling with all sorts of spirits almost as if we were actually in a human town. It may be a surprise, but even spirits have begun their advance in their own economy, although it is only used completely for ornamental purposes. Unlike us humans, spirits do not need food, water, or sleep to live as they have no physical body. However, in exchange for that is spirit power. Gaining this allows the spirit to become more powerful and be more likely to defend themselves against attacks from other spirits.

“Oh, Zenith, let’s go there!”

The spirit girl points at a familiar café, namely the exact café that my friend Chris manages, except in the spirit realm. Upon entering the shop, we were greeted by a spirit with the same attire as Chris’ making what seems to be coffee behind the bar. It takes on the body of a human but its neck branches the head of a horse instead of a human, its wavy hair growing not atop its head but down its spine. A spirit of the Philippines referred to as a tikbalang. We go up to the counter and give it our orders, apathetic of its inhuman figure.

“What are you getting, Zenith?”

“I’ll just get the cappuccino.”

“Great! Then I’ll have the same!”

The spirit girl excretes three small black orbs from under the palm of her hand. These black orbs are the currency in this world. They come from wild spirits that have nothing in mind but the destruction of those around them. They feel no emotion and are only out for chaos. Naturally, every spirit and human despises them, so the person who first introduced economy to this world, may it be a spirit or a human, thought of making those vermin spirits as currency. The reason why a spirit would like to get its hands on these black orbs is that it can absorb them and turn them into its own spirit power. Incidentally, I have black orbs of my own to bribe spirits in my missions.

As I was thinking to myself, a strong aroma of caramel and nuts assail my sense of smell. The tikbalang brought us the two cappuccinos we ordered. Despite how everything in the spirit world looks like, these cappuccinos are the real deal. They are not made by spirit power or the sort, but instead by the hands of a human professional with a familiar grip on the taste of their coffee. The man I am referring to being, Chris.

He operates his café in both the human world and the spirit realm. As amazing as it is, he has been working this job for more than 10 years and serving both humans and spirits in his time. He is a natural genius when it comes to coffee and chose to drop out of school to pursue this field with his father. Normally, physical objects like this coffee cannot be touched by spirits. But if they are sent to the spirit world, any spirit will be able to make contact with it, the same applies to us humans.

I think that as I take a quizzical sidelong glance at the spirit girl beside me. For some reason, she dragged me over to his café. I don't quite understand her aim. Is she actually just trying to have a friendly tour of the town with me?

“Mmm! That was delicious! What do you think, Zenith!?”

“Yeah, that cappuccino really hit the spot. But, hey, why are we here again?”

“Hmm? Zenith, do you not remember?”

“A-Ahh... N-No, I remember, I swear.”

Thrown into a slight panic, I trip over my words as I try to deny her. I realize just how weak my denial was, but the spirit girl simply shoots me a puzzled glance and moves onward to the next destination. For now, it looks like she still thinks I'm Zenith, but she's starting to have suspicions. I need to collect more information before then.

I catch a whiff of the strong scent of broth and meat as we approach a shop with the characters “ラーメン” on cloth signs translating to “Ramen” from Japanese katakana. I don't personally know the owner of this shop, but they seem to be aware of the supernatural as they have a shop in this world as well.

“Boss, I'll have a tonkatsu ramen.”

“Me too, me too!”

“Comin' right up!”

Unlike at Chris' café, the person who operates this shop in the spirit realm is not a spirit, but instead a human that cooks the meals here as well. Just by looking around, I can tell this place is quite popular, proven by the number of spirits occupying the table and chatting their hearts out. Being around this atmosphere just makes me question if there is a difference between spirits and humans. If you take away their half-human, half-animal bodies and those extra arms, legs, and heads, they might as well be humans with scary faces.

“I raise my heart towards the zenith!”



“U-Uhm?”

The spirit girl beside me catches my attention after she shouts that strange phrase. I didn’t notice, but the two tonkatsu ramen we ordered have arrived, and right now, she is pointing the chopsticks she was given upwards toward the ceiling.

“What are you doing?”

Slightly put off by her actions, I raise the question.

“Nnn! I knew it! You don’t remember, Zenith!”

She then goes into a sudden tantrum as she sways her arms and legs uncontrollably. This reminds me of my little sister, Jane. Whenever something wasn’t going her way she would always throw a tantrum, and of course, me or my parents were there to calm her down.

“You’re making me really mad right now, Zenith! You seriously forgot our promise?!”

“Promise...? No, I... remember... I think?”

Ahh, I’m done for. No one would be stupid enough to actually believe that I was the person they’re misunderstanding for. I stealthily hide my hand to go for the machete fastened to my hip.

“Come with me!”

But before I could do so, she takes my hand and drags me out of the shop. Not before long, we arrive at the nearest playground. Though I say that, in reality, this is a private property that just happens to have a large playground in their backyard filled with swings, slides, spinners, seesaws, monkey bars, and dome climbers. I don’t believe I’ve ever been here before, but instead of being surprised by the many playground structures money can buy, a tingling sense of déjà vu crawls up my spine as my eyes dart around the field.

“This is...”

“Here! Do you remember anything yet!?”

The spirit girl shoots me a sharp glance, the anger evident in her eyes as she desperately tries to make me remember unexperienced memories... No. I can’t be too sure. Her passion overwhelms me, making me uncertain if I truly hadn’t been to this place yet. I inadvertently scavage through my memories, leaving myself completely open to attacks all the while. At this time, I could have certainly been jumped, but such thoughts were buried deep in my curiosity.

I spend a few minutes in silence, but with no memories to match this sight. I report to the spirit girl with a silent nod to answer her.

“Zenith, you idiot! I hate you!”

Her frustration was clear for all to see as she stomps away from me. Unexpectedly, the spirit girl hurls a similar defamatory remark that my sister said to me yesterday. She then climbs up one of the dome climbers as I stare at her from below. She raises her hand and points her finger towards the sky as she exclaims.

“I raise my heart toward the zenith! I will see to it that I reach the top, the throne of the almighty and all-knowing. To be one of the individuals that can stop wars before they even begin, they who solve problems before they arise! The chosen ones that strive from hardship and the ginormous hurdles of life! The apex of the arcane, Zenith!”

She pours her heart out with her every word, having them weigh as much as her burning passion. It was then that I was reminded, the dark memories that I did not want to resurface. The very words she was uttering were something I picked up in my childhood from a famous television show that highlighted the hardship in life. Its message was beautiful but was romanticized so much that its message was buried under the flashy moves the protagonist performed on their enemies, causing people to joke about it rather than marveling at their morals.

As a child, I often echoed this line without thinking about its message and doing so only because I thought it was cool. I parroted this message so much that I put off some of my friends, and only now do I realize how unsavory I was. Truly a dark past that I wanted to forget, and had succeeded until this spirit girl reminded me of it. Having my most mortifying moments rise from the ground, I clasp my ears shut and trembled to the ground, trying to shoo away as many of her words as much as possible.

But then... my defenses were penetrated by a calming melody. Without my knowing, the spirit girl finished her soul-crushing speech and took out her flute. She had caught my attention. I didn't think much of it then, but she was playing a familiar tune. When did I hear this piece? And where?

The more I listen to her music, the more the raging storm inside me turns into a calm until finally, the bright sunlight taking the form of silver linings penetrated through the dark clouds and bathed me under its warm embrace. The memories flowed back.

It was a hot summer day about 30 degrees Celcius, a prickling salt to the wound of my burning fever. I was about 7 years old at the time, a small 7-year-old boy suffering from a high fever peaking at around 40 degrees Celcius. I was burning through the cool cloths my parents placed on my head, reducing them to dry cloths before I even knew it. But despite my high temperature, I felt chills run through my body as if I was stripped naked at the foot of winter, its merciless cold breeze wrapping around to entrap me in ice.

All I could hear was the thundering roars of my coughs, striking nothing but the larynx and spreading its vile disease in the air. I could barely feel the muscles in my body and every movement felt like it was chained to pound weights. All I could do was look outside the window where nature was staring back at me peacefully.

I felt mocked. Why is it that nature and everyone else was having a peaceful time while I stay in my room bedridden with this painful sickness? I stare at it with scornful eyes, jealous of inanimate objects for being what they are. My mind comes back to what my parents told me, rueful of the day I left the house and was greeted by a stranger. They told me that the cause of this fever was an *usog* or *balis* caused by being greeted or cursed by a person possessing an Evil Eye. That was the man that caused this agonizing experience. It was, of course, a superstition, but I had no way of knowing at the time. I thought I would stay like this and die on the spot. That was just the degree of pain I was feeling until...

“Hey, what are you doing?”

My eyes turn to the window and find the owner of the voice that called out to me was a small girl about my age. She had a short bob haircut and wore a plain one-piece dress. I thought it was strange for someone to be in the backwater areas of the town. Fearing she was another holder of the hex of the Evil Eye, I turn my body around to ignore her.

“Do you want to stay like that? It looks kind of painful.”

She’s definitely mocking me, I thought. She was outside bathing in the warm light of the sun while I was bedridden in agony. I couldn’t help but become jealous. I shut my eyes in an attempt to erase her from existence, but that just didn’t work. I could still hear her voice.

Then, when I reopened my eyes, I was in an unfamiliar place, but at the same time, I knew I was still in my room. The furniture remained at its usual position, but their appearance resembled glowsticks. I didn’t know why but every object in my room radiated light. In addition to that, it seemed to be snowing in my room. Each one touching me disappeared into my skin like the snowflakes melting to my body heat. It was a bizarre scenery that made me forget about my pain momentarily just to give me enough time to marvel at it.

But when my eyes finally detached from it, I turn my head in front of me to see a dark blob emitting a repulsive stench that can make a grown man feel sick to his core sucking at my body like a filthy parasite. Such an abhorrent sight instilled a deep terror inside me. Why? Why does this monstrous being exist and why is it defiling my body? I was so terrified that I completely lost my voice, I couldn’t scream like how I would want to. All I could do was watch it taint my body with its mucky slime.

It was then that a flute pierced it at its center, causing it to scream in pain until it disintegrated into dust, leaving nothing but a small black orb which was then caught by an unfamiliar, tiny hand. Tracing the hand, I find the little girl I saw outside the window just a minute ago. She had opened the lock window and was standing on its frame, extending a flute with her left hand and catching the small black orb with her right.

I couldn't understand how she was able to open the metal latch from outside, but I couldn't care less about that as I realized that she saved my life from that disgusting blob. My fear was washed with a wave of relief and the horror that clogged my tear sacs cleared, letting the salty tears come dripping down like a broken faucet. I was eternally grateful to this stranger for sparing me the terror of watching that blob any longer. If I had to endure that any more than I had, I'm sure I would have a lasting trauma about that experience.

"Th...hic ... Thank... hic... you... hic hic... so much... hic..."

I attempt to express my gratitude as the tears trickle down my cheeks. In contrast to that, the girl in front of me was unaffected and came up to me with a bright smile on her face.

"No problem! So, hey! With that out of the way, do you want to play?!"

"hic... P-Play...? Hic... I can't do that... hic... I'm..."

"I'm sick," is what I wanted to tell her. But then, I realize that my body temperature was back to normal, I didn't feel any chills, no coughs, and my body's strength was slowly returning to me. I was shocked. The burning fever I had just a few seconds was reduced to nothing more than an afterthought. It took me a while to grasp the situation, but it seemed like that dark blob was the cause of my fever. Not some kind of hex from a stranger, but a parasite that could turn invisible and take all my energy. And now with it gone, I felt as good as ever.

"You're...? What? Do you want to play or not?"

Hearing the word "play" caused something to click inside of me. From my shocked, nonplussed face, my lips curve from ear to ear and the gleeful emotions locked down by my agony had burst like a dam.

"Sure, let's go!"

For the rest of the day, I followed her lead as she took me from place to place. We visited the local café and bought a few sandwiches, to the ramen shop and experienced its jaunty atmosphere, to the nearby private playground where we tired ourselves out until we had no energy left.

Before parting, we lay on the strangely bioluminescent grass and left each other with a memory to remember the other with. The girl had left me with a beautiful, calming melody, while I left her with a dumb quote from a television show that I thought was cool. After that, I fell asleep as I relaxed on the grass and woke up inside my room, my normal, electricity-lit room.

I went to tell my parents and friends about my experience, but all of them said it was nonsense and laughed at me. I tried to convince them, but instead, they slowly persuaded the child that I was into believing that it was all a fever dream. In the end, I buried those memories deep inside my head and hoped that they never see the light of day again. But perhaps because I began seeing spirits 5 years after that, I was never able to truly forget about it.

Now, that very same spirit stood before me, digging me out of the hole I created out of embarrassment. She dragged me around town to the same places we ventured to at the time. That was our promise before we parted ways.

“On the next time we meet, let’s repeat this day and have the time of our lives!”

I see now. I was the fool. I didn’t trust myself and succumbed to the words of others. I didn’t have enough confidence to say that everything I saw was real. And now, I had to have my savior dig me out of my hole to remember. That promise we made that day.

The spirit girl finishes playing her piece and jumps off of the dome climber, landing in front of me. A tired expression decorated her face, most likely from the multiple attempts she made to make me remember.

“Well, Zenith? Do you remember?”

Although I was busy internally chastising myself, I knew I had to stop for a moment and finally acknowledge her. I soften the strained expression on my face after finally realizing my fault.

“Yeah, I remember. But you have one thing wrong, my name is Zen, and Zenith is the name I gave you!”

“Wh-Whaaaaat!? You’re lying! No way!”

“Yes way! I said that clearly, didn’t I!”

“No, you didn’t! You said ‘I am Zenith!’ You even made me repeat it!”

“Yeah, but that’s because you had no idea what a name is! You couldn’t even pronounce it right so I made you repeat my words! I said ‘You are now Zenith. Repeat after me: ‘I am Zenith!’”

“How do you expect me to understand such complex instructions?! That’s clearly your fault!”

“No, you listen!”

We continued our argument for a while, mindless of the time that continued to tick at every second. I never expected to meet a childhood friend that I forgot I had. Such are the happy coincidences of life.

## IV

A few hours later, we finally settle our argument and established that I am Zen, and she is Zenith, a silly argument I never thought I would have. Now, I am following Zenith into the nearby forest. Apparently, we are here to meet Zenith’s guardian, which is strange to me.

In the spirit realm, there are two types of spirits: True Spirits and Spirited Souls. True Spirits are those who are born in this world, meanwhile Spirited Souls are the souls of the dead that did not properly pass on because of an emotion that is tying them to this world. It is possible that Zenith is a spirited soul, but even so, they lose their memories the moment they are reborn here. Meaning that there is no possible way for her to recall her parents.

We chat with each other as we walk through the forest, a bright smile on both of our faces as we enjoy the peaceful atmosphere of the spirit realm. With the sky pitch black and the trees glowing like precious gems, we catch sight of various spirits. Diwatas playing by a nearby lake, their porcelain skin decorating the water like pearls and the thin sheet of wings sprouting behind their back flapping rapidly, causing a small drizzle to rain down on their playmates. The tiny dwendes scrambling in and out of trees, their mushroom houses decorating it, greets us with a wave with their white hands poking out of their thick hair raising up to their pointy hats made seemingly from mushrooms. And the occasional kapre tree giant leaning on a tree with their ape-like body and furry black hair as they pleasure themselves with the smoke in their hands made from tree leaves. I was not a stranger to these sights as I have wandered on this world for a few years now, but for some reason, seeing them with someone I know, on top of that a childhood friend, I was assailed with a mystical experience, much like the first time I arrived in Lucban.

Not long after that, we arrive at the destination. We are standing in front of a gigantic tree in the middle of a glade. There was a wooden door attached to the tree, suggesting that a person lived there.

Zenith opens the door and announces herself, but no one responded. I silently follow behind her as we entered the treehouse. It was immediately noticeable that the interior was wider than the tree outside suggested.

She stops in front of a wooden door painted in red. It emitted a strange feeling despite being just a simple door. That just proved how strong the spirit behind this door is. I prepare myself as Zenith opens the door.

Peering through the door, I spot a man sitting in the middle of the empty room with his legs curled into each other. He donned a kind of shawl and loincloth made out of leaves, as well as a crown with a skull and horns. His figure is rough with sculpted muscles, evident he did not waste time building them through either his lifetime or the natural evolution of his spirit type. But most of all, his power was unlike anything I have ever seen. At first, I thought he possessed spirit power so small that I could not see, but it was the opposite. He has so much spirit power that it could engulf the whole tree. The only thing I can think of that prevented me from noticing at first is the red door to this room. This is a spirit not to be messed with. But despite his threatening aura, Zenith walked up to him casually.

“Heey! I’m back! Look who I have with me!”

Zenith steps aside and introduces me to the man with her arms extended similar to a host presenting their subject on stage.

“This is my friend, Zen! He’s the one I’ve been talking to you about!”

The man angles his head toward me, staring in silence with his petrifying gaze. I didn’t let it show on my face, but I felt a slight shiver in my legs, constantly anxious about the spirit. After some time, the room filled with tense silence which weighed heavier on me the moment his deep voice reverberated through the room.

“Come here.”

His voice shackles my muscles, rendering me immovable. I can feel the cold sweat profusely secreting throughout my body trying to escape the ominous aura the man is emitting. I was completely rooted in place.

“What is wrong, young man?”

The spirit speaks once more, urging me to move but all that accomplished was increasing the burden on my whole body. I was afraid. I can tell that if this spirit wished, he could end my life without me even noticing. The pressure was so much that my instincts told me to go backward, but just before I do, Zenith pushes me from behind and seats me in front of the spirit.

Alarm bells were at their loudest, and my thoughts were in chaos, leaving only my base instincts to save myself from the situation. The spirit scrutinized me, watching my every movement and examining my body and the tools that I equipped myself with.

Then, the man raises his hand. I inadvertently raise my arms to defend myself from whatever he was planning to do. Seconds later, nothing happened. I gingerly open my eyes to look at the spirit. Strangely enough, my fear subsided and my heartbeat returned to normal. My eyes widen as I stare blankly at the man.

“You seem to be unnerved. I simply calmed your soul down. Do not fret. I will not hurt you.”

I could tell right away; he used his power on me. The heavy pressure behind his voice and his intimidating aura completely disappeared. He was able to conceal them from me. It just drives home how powerful this spirit is.

“I would like to ask you a question. What is your sentiment about spirits and humans?”

“S-Sentiment?”

He asked me a question that came out of the left field. Does he want to know about my thoughts? I consider his question before giving my answer.

“I-I think that there is not much difference between us, well, leaving the power factor aside. I can think of spirits as equals because of my position, but of course, I cannot accept those who actively harm other humans. They’re like... common criminals among humans, but instead, they’re spirits.”

“Oh? So you are a hunter, young man?”

“N-No, I’m not. I am a scientist. I’m here to learn more about this world and its inhabitants to understand them better. But I do work as a hunter if I need to. I-I will not let spirits who murder humans slide... E-Even if it’s you...!”

I somehow worked up the courage to give him a piece of my mind. Although I was deathly afraid, and my mentality was reduced to that of a wild animal, I will stay true to my ideals. If I die here, then so be it. I prefer dying with my head up high rather than my tail tucked in between my legs anyway.

“I see... Interesting. I have never heard of a scientist before. Perhaps, you truly have a chance to make a change.”

“A change? What do you mean?”

The spirit turns silent on my question, leaving me on my own to ponder his words.



“I believe it is time for you two to be off. The moon approaches.”

“Oh yeah, I didn’t notice. Well, bye for now, Guardian! Come on, Zen, let’s go!”

Zenith runs up to me and takes my hand.

“W-What? What is this all of the sudden?”

“It’s almost nighttime! We need to get back the river!”

We leave the spirit by his lonesome, and with my head thrown into confusion once more. I don’t quite understand, but we hurry back to the west river of the farmland. I try to make Zenith explain herself, but she insists on keeping it as a surprise.

“Heeey! We made it just in time!”

Zenith jumps cheerfully like a rugby player making a touchdown. Meanwhile, I stand behind her with a smile on my face. Whatever it might be, I’m just glad she’s enjoying herself. Before I knew it, Zenith felt like a little sister to me. An innocent child that just wants to play in the mud and learn new experiences. Seeing her like this soothes my soul. As the person she saved all those years ago, it’s good to see that she hasn’t changed one bit. As I’m thinking this, Zenith calls to me.

“Hey, Zen, I want you to introduce you to someone!”

“Oh? Who is it?”

“He’s the person who’s been protecting me all this time. Without him, I don’t think I would be here right now.”

“Wow, then this must be one amazing person, huh?”

“Yep! We have the same capabilities, but he’s just that much more powerful! Oh, he’s coming! Once it becomes night, he’ll be here. In exchange, I’ll be gone for a bit, but I’ll be back to ask you what you thought tomorrow morning.”

“Hm?”

There was something about her explanation that hit me wrong. It slipped my mind, but Zenith is a spirit. At first, I thought she was a spirited soul, which is why she always kept her human form, but that’s wrong. From what it sounds like, she transforms into another person at night. That is the kind of spirit she is. I ponder for a while, eliminating all the other possibilities and narrowing down her type of spirit.

She is a child that originated in the Philippines, so I can cross out any other child-spirits in other countries. A child spirit of the Philippines with multiple personalities, huh... All that

comes to mind is... a tiyanak. A child-like vampiric creature. Thinking about it, it all makes sense. I can't wait to see what kind of personality this one has... huh?

It was then that it crossed my mind. The whole reason I was sent here was to solve the murders happening around the area. Of course, I was sent evidence on what spirit it could possibly be... and sure enough, tiyanak was one of them.

My heart suddenly drops and trepidation comes crawling up my skin and standing my hairs. I did not like where this was going. All of the sudden, a great wave of anxiety struck me, drowning me and surfacing goosebumps. Spirits tend to be neutral, and don't attack unless provoked, but how can I be so sure Zenith's other personality isn't aggressive? Realizing this, my body moves instinctively.


"Wait, Zenith!"

I tried to stop her. I didn't know how, but all I thought was stopping her from transforming. However, before I could even reach her, it was already too late. Her skin takes a blood hue, hair turning ashen grey, fingers and toes morphing and stretching, creating razor-sharp claws. Seeing that transformation, my eyes turned hollow, the light inside them being washed away by fear. Not a second later, she pounced.

I instinctively dodge to the side, so ungraceful that I almost tumbled down. In the span of a quick moment, she had extended her claws to leave a deep lacerate in my face. The only reason I was able to dodge was because of my primary senses to live. I snap out of it and regain control over my body. I was in the middle of battle. Whether I liked it or not, I was in battle with the person that saved me years ago.

The tiyanak twists its body irregularly in ways that would crush the bones of normal humans to follow up her initial attack and launches her claws once more. I quickly take a step backward and put the power in my legs to root myself to the ground and strain my spine back to limbo under those deadly claws.

Its sharp reflexes take notice of my desperate escape so it bent its arms backward with an awful crack as its joints could be heard shattering to chase me down. As its arms were charging its swipe, a large spike emerges from the ground and skewers the tiyanak's stomach from below, dragging it upwards as the spike rose toward the sky.

The spike was by no means an act of god as it emerged directly in front of one of my legs, specifically, the one I took a step back with before dodging its attack. It would be unnoticeable unless I put some weight on my legs, but these boots I'm wearing have the symbols  engraved in their outsole that grants me the ability to summon this spike on command so long as

the surface I'm standing on can easily be molded. Thankfully, when I first dodged the tiyanak's attack I was able to hit a patch of mud, allowing me to do this.

With the spike firmly embedded into the tiyanak, I take that opportunity to draw the machete out of the scabbard fastened to my hip and find a way to deal with my predicament. As my eyes return to the spike, the tiyanak was gone, but disjuncting from a spike three feet past its body is impossible, how could this be?

Just as I was thinking that, my hairs suddenly stand as if they were in electric shock. I could feel a spine-chilling bloodlust piercing through my body. As I trace its source, I spot the tiyanak in a deformed shape, emerging from a black cloud, slowly rebuilding itself as it launched at me with its claws extended to kill.

I send a powerful horizontal slash its way, metal screeching on metal, and before I realize it, my machete was parried, the arc of my blade inches past my target. At this point, trying to raise any form of defense will be too late, but if I do nothing I will die.

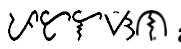
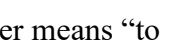
I can feel my heart pounding in my chest and the blood rushing throughout my body as I am faced with the terrifying horror of death. Recognizing this unfortunate circumstance, my skin pales, rerouting the blood flow from the surface of my body to my arms, legs, brain, and other essential organs to increase my strength and senses, pupils dilate, sharpening my sight and slowing down the flow of time as my neurons fire at incredible speeds, and my mouth dries up as the blood flow to my digestive system decreases, prioritizing my senses to survive.

In a single moment, I find the right steps to survive my blood-curdling dance with death. Acting on it, I quickly release the grip on the machete and pivot on my foot, turning my back towards the tiyanak at the last possible second and enter a crouch. One of the tiyanak's claws lacerates me from behind... or at least should have if it weren't from the special defenses enchanted in my cloak. This type of cloth may flutter in the wind like normal clothing, but it has high durability against spirit power, and as a being created from spirit power, the tiyanak could only struggle as it tries to penetrate my cloak. Undesirably, the force of its attack flows through the cloth and transfers to my body, but I grit my teeth and tough it out to keep my form. Better this than gaping wounds and broken bones.

While one of its claws hit me, the other was too extended and couldn't hit me when I made that sudden pivot and a crouch, resulting in its claws passing over my shoulder and exposing its arm to me. Before the tiyanak breaks its bones to reach me again, I grab its arm and perform a Seoi Nage, a judo shoulder throw. Considering the tiyanak's quick reflexes and ability to break its bones on command, I would be a fool to throw it on the ground below me where it can easily cut me down with its claws. Instead, I make use of its velocity to redirect its trajectory to a nearby tree.

I execute my plan perfectly and the tiyanak screeches as it was being hurled in the air, but I don't stop here. I reach into my cloak and take out four throwing knives, holding two in each hand, I predict the tiyanak's form the moment it hits the tree and throw the knives one by one to ensure my accuracy, but so quick that it looks like I threw them all at once. I then take out more knives and launch them to follow up my first four.

A resounding scream from the tiyanak rings in my ear and trembles the air as its hard impact with the tree was greeted with a glut of knives. It's clear to me that my throwing skills have yet to dull as every knife hit their target. Elbows, knees, wrists, ankles, neck, and head. Those body parts have been affixed to the tree with my knives, deeply embedded in the tree trunk.

A black cloud then appears out of thin air and wraps around the tiyanak. This is the ability it used earlier to escape the spike. Much like a portal, it uses these clouds to decompose and swallow its body in order to escape these types of attacks. Normally, these knives would do absolutely nothing. However, if you look closely, its handles have the symbols  and  carved on either side. The first symbol means "to sharpen" and the other means "to purify." As the first symbol has done, the knives are firmly rooted in the tree trunk, meanwhile, the second symbol negates any attempt to use or expand spirit power which is what's keeping the tiyanak from escaping. After realizing it cannot escape, the tiyanak tries its best to struggle out of its binds.

I stop to catch my breath, staring at the spirit I once called Zenith. Every breath gradually turns into grunts as my fingernails dig into my clothes and my muscles tense from frustration. After surviving the tango with death, the situation finally sinks in. I have to kill the person who saved my life and welcomed me to the supernatural world. I stare at the machete a few inches away from me with despair. The very one that saved my life multiple times and helped me save others. Why must it come to this?

Is this what I had in mind when I decided to enter this side of the world? No, definitely not. What I signed up for is the opportunity to explore a hidden world and protect the people who are affected by it. But, coincidentally, the person who put a smile on my face and gave me the power to see spirits is one of the spirits I swore to kill to protect others. Is this truly the only way to protect the innocent? Do I truly need to taint my very being with the memory of slaying my very first spirit friend?

I stare at Zenith... no, the tiyanak as let the scene sink in. This is not the person who saved me. It is now a mass murderer that hunts humans for spirit power. Not a single memory of me remains in my friend's eyes. Only that of a wild beast out for blood. Telling myself that, I take the first step and pick up my weapon of justice and stand in front of the tiyanak.

It isn't dead despite having knives on its head and neck. That is because the only way to kill spirits is to strike them at their core, in this situation, at the center of its chest. All I have to do is stab its chest, and it will all be over.

The rattling of metal fills the silent air, signaling the knives weakening their grip on the tiyanak, but for some reason, all of that turns silent in my ears as if I had a filter. I was much too consumed in my train of thought. This was how much this action bothered me.

"Is this truly the only way?"

I thought as I frantically considered all the possibilities. But instead of a possibility of a friend returning to normal and never again turning to this beast, the first one I stumble upon is a possibility of the tiyanak getting away and attacking me in my sleep, painting the walls of the house red as it slaughters my family.

A loud click reaches my ears. The tiyanak had escaped its binds, terror had filled my mind and I froze up, leaving me open for the tiyanak to kill. Despite that, the deadly strike never came. It was then that another click reached my ears and I light whisper I could barely make sense of, its volume much lower than the first one, which amounted to as much as a light tap on a piece of wood. It was then followed up by a muffled clack. A piece of metal dropped on the grass, most likely one of my knives.

I warily raise my head to see what had happened. It was to my surprise that the tiyanak was gone. Trepidation struck me for a moment, thinking that the tiyanak had somehow activated its skill to disappear with just one of the purifying knives off its body. But then, I realized that it wasn't the case. I traced my arms to see that it had extended on its own, handling the machete, it stabbed into the tree where the tiyanak's core once was. I didn't notice, but I instinctively killed it. If I had to guess, the cause was probably me imagining it kill my family instead. I just didn't want that... but this is the price I have to pay.

The strength in my limbs leaving me, I drop to the ground on my bottom and let go of my weapon. I couldn't move, not because I was tired, but because the memory of Zenith was haunting me.

In the middle of my pathetic mourning, I catch the sound of footsteps approaching me. This presence, this heavy, intimidating aura... there was no doubt about it, the one approaching me is the spirit Zenith called her guardian. He probably came to take revenge and end my life. Thinking this, I accepted my fate and made no attempt to run. So much about dying with my head up high... there is no way I can do that after what I've done. The least I can do is accept it as punishment.

"Well, young man, what is your plan now?"

The spirit called out to me from behind. Why bother talking to me? Just end it already!

“Plan? Heh, obviously to sit here and die. Not like there’s any other way now that you’re here.”

I answer aggressively, saving not a single thought towards respect and proper mannerisms. It all didn’t matter. I was going to die... or so I thought.

“Why do you think that? I plan nothing of the sort.”

“What!? You’re Zenith’s guardian, aren’t you!? Why wouldn’t you be!? You saw me kill her didn’t you!?”

I throw a fit rebuking the spirit’s lack of desire to take my life. This is such a silly sight. I’m *asking* for him to take my life.

“You are misunderstanding me. I am no guardian. I never claimed myself to be. You are disillusioned by the girl’s words. She may have thought of me as a guardian, but we do not share the same idea.”

“What...? You’ve been lying to her!?”

Hearing his words forces me to take a stand. I turn around to face him with my fist ready to meet his ugly mug. Before I do, my body freezes, not out of fear, but because of the spirit power he used on me.

“My, oh my, you almost met death through her hands and you remain attached to her. Such a mystery you humans are. I cannot understand how you beings think. You killed your assailant only to mourn their death, your hypocrisy baffles me.”

His words pierce my soul, reminding me of my sin.

“Kgh! What do you want anyway!? If you aren’t here to kill me, then why are you here in the first place!?”

I take out my anger on the spirit, shouting at the top of my lungs on levels that make me worry about the state of my voice box.

“What I desired was nothing but proof. You named yourself a scientist, a different occupation from the hunters I regularly encounter. You even claimed to see us as equals, no different from your own. I had hope. That perhaps the person in front of me will have the chance to create a human.”

“What do you mean?”

I can’t understand his cryptic words, so I press him to explain himself.

“That spirit... It is a tiyanak, a creature with two personalities, a lovable child and a cold-hearted predator. As you may have noticed, its energetic side surfaces in the light of day while the other in the shadows of the night. Their memories refuse to merge, leaving them with no knowledge of each other’s activities. That poor personally mistook the other for a guardian that protects her at night. Such is the curse of naivete.”

“What are you getting at!?”

The calm, slow pace of his voice only serves to arouse my impatience. Tired of waiting, I shout at him for answers.

“Hrm...”

The annoyance in his voice is clear, yet he chooses to ignore it and continue.

“It was turning much like a human by the day. Despite being a spirit, she had the same characteristics as a human child. The moment I encountered her, she was much like every rampaging spirit, so I decided to ignore her. However, one day, she changed. Her aggressive personality kept on her murders spirits and humans alike, in spite of that, she weakened! When I saw her passive personality, I noticed that she was the only one gaining power. Normally, these shared personality spirits will share the same power, but not for this one. Amazingly, she was fighting against her aggressive personality unconsciously!”

Hearing this shocked me, yet it all made sense. When I met her earlier today, Zenith reached speeds that my eyes couldn’t follow, but just earlier, I was able to keep up with the tiyanak despite it having the same spiritual body as Zenith. To add to that, the spirit in front of me began raising his voice in excitement as he talked about her, a completely different tone from earlier.

“It was then that it came to mind. Perhaps a spirit can change and become human. That was the change I was looking for when I was watching you two from afar.”

His voice turned solemn, perhaps because he, too, was looking for a way to become human.

“But alas, you humans are fond of empty words and inferior mindsets. I saw everything. The moment that spirit showed its dark side, you emphasized her faults in order to justify slaying her. I thought you could be different from the others, but I was wrong, just like them, you were quick to take the short path.”

“What are you on about?!”

“Do not lie to yourself, child. You were not truly trying to save her. You shielded yourself using flimsy excuses such as your mission and the people you protect. Whether they are hunters or scientists, you humans think the same.”

“...”

I tried to deny his accusations, but I feel like I did exactly as he said, rendering me incapable of retorting.

“I saw it in your eyes. The desperation to find a solution. No, sorry, a slip of the tongue, I meant to say: a means to an end.”

“W-What!?”

“If it was a solution you were after, you would have let the spirit escape and continued your fight into the night as you pondered for a solution, but instead you limited yourself to the time it took for it to escape to end it all before the battle prolonged itself. All you wanted was for everything to end while trying to save the spirit as a secondary objective. What you truly desired was to live, not to protect, and most definitely not to save.”

He...He’s not wrong. As much as I want to deny it, everything he’s saying is making sense and I hate it! I was trying to consider all the possibilities, but time was against me, or so I thought. In a wider point of view, I had until daytime to think of a solution, but I thought of only to end it. If I was actually desperate enough to save Zenith, I should’ve...

“Lay down your life and fight through the night. If only you had done that, then perhaps my hopes would have been answered.”

The spirit lets out a tired sigh and turns his back to me, releasing me of his spirit power and allowing me to move.

“In the end, it was nothing but a dream. One unattainable, only to exist in fantasy.”

With those last words, he walks away, leaving me on my lonesome. My anger completely subsides, letting room for different emotions: sorrow, regret, and disappointment towards myself. Ever since the moment I entered the town, I thought that I have grown and put myself above others. I knew more than them, I thought. There’s nothing I can do if they don’t understand me, I thought. In other words, I was arrogant and conceited. Just because I knew about the supernatural, I thought I was special, yapping about being a scientist, an apocrologist that will discover the mysteries of this world. But despite those hearty boasts, this is what I ended up with.

“Empty words, he said... He... isn’t wrong.”

I have discovered nothing, accomplished nothing, and killed my friend in the impetus of my position and the low possibility of the massacre of my family. To normal people, fighting throughout the night is a death wish, but for hunters and other members of the secret society I am



a part of, such a feat is required before joining a field. I had the ability to save her, but I did not. In other words, I was a coward, a lowly coward.

“Why... am I even here...?”

I direct my query as I look up the dead sky with not a single bright light decorating it, much like myself. What am I doing? Am I looking for a god? A god that can bestow upon me an answer to why I lived instead of Zenith? An ultimate being that will explain to me why a lowly coward like me who ran away from death lived instead of the person who brought light to all those around her and fought her inner demons unconsciously? My question goes unanswered.


It begins to rain from the pitch-black abyss above me. Yet, not a single raindrop pelts my sorry body. Ahh, it is raining from the dark abyss, but not from the sky above me, the spirit realm doesn't even have weather. It is raining from the dark abyss in between my nose and forehead, reflecting the darkness in my skull's eye sockets towards the sky above.

## V

In the fantasy-like world they call the Spirit Realm where the sky is forever covered in a dark veil, where its natural light comes not from suns or stars, but instead every object in the world. The world where the locals are spiritual beings instead of physical individuals. Two humans leap and dash around the area as they swing their weapons at a rodent-like being. It walks on four legs and possesses a long whip-like tail of a rat, but strangely, its head and tail are swapped, making it so it can only run backward.

“Hurry, Michael, the marbles!”

“Yeah, take this!”

The person called Michael digs in a pouch and throws the marbles inside them, scattering around the rodent. The symbols  could be seen carved into each marble, evoking the order “to stun.” It tries to escape the rain of marbles but was knocked back with a horizontal swipe of a spear from the person who called out to Michael.

“Scrwyyyyyyy!!”

The creature cries out in pain as it gradually slows down until it freezes in place. Confirming the enemy lost its ability to move, the two people breath a sigh of relief.

“Haah... Good job, Michael.”

“Not too bad yourself, Yosuke.”

“Do you think this is how Prof Shardae wanted this?”

“I think so. Let me call him to inform him we’re done.”

“No, there’s no need for that.”

A voice calls out to Michael and Yosuke from behind, catching both of their attention. A man in a black lab coat with strange blue linings in them approaches carrying a large suitcase about a third of his size.

“Thanks for the help. Usually, I would do this myself, but the upper ups are so overprotective it’s laughable.”

He casually strolls in and places his suitcase on the ground, revealing fifteen vials of liquid separated by color. There laid purple, blue, and pink liquid, all in groups of five. The professor takes the syringe placed in one of the case’s cavities and inserted it on a purple vial.

“Oh, don’t worry. We understand it’s important. You’re the best scientist we have here professor. No need to be modest.”

“Haha. No need to flatter me, Yosuke.”

The professor siphons out a quarter of the vial and inserts it in a pink vial. He then began mixing the liquid by lightly shaking it.

“Hey, Prof, why do we need this sigbin anyway? Can’t any spirit do?”

“Oh? Well, just like us humans, these spirits can also have disabilities. Sigbins are one of these spirits. They are shy in nature. They usually hide themselves from others may it be humans or spirits. Their invisibility power helps them with that. Unfortunately, at night, they turn into feral beasts who are only out to hunt. It’s their way of gaining spirit power. Think of it as primal instinct. But there are some that do not wish this. So, hopefully, this will release them from that, though it takes a bit of time to make.”

The professor takes a glance at the other two, their faces blank and their minds high up in the clouds. Realizing just how little they understood, the professor breaks it down using an analogy.

“Think of it as an innocent child. They always try their best to do good, but when they’re faced with pain, they try their best to escape it, whether they need to lie or hurt someone to achieve it. Most of the time, they don’t know what they’re doing is wrong, which is the part that makes them innocent. I guess you can call it their inner demon. They follow it around until they realize their mistake, then there’s the situation of fighting them, but that usually happens in around adolescence”

Michael and Yosuke’s faces furrow slightly, showing their awkward reaction.

“Man, Prof, that’s one harsh example there. I can’t deny the majority of those kids exist but there are some that don’t experience that right?”

“Oh, yeah, there are. Sorry about that, I didn’t mean to make it sound that way. But, if you think about it, that may be the reason why there are more normal people than psychopaths. If they deal with their demons early, then that means an earlier start to build up a proper mindset.”

“Hm... When you put it like that, it does make sense! Wow, you really are something, Prof!”

“Hahaha...”

Yosuke seemingly listens to the other two’s conversation in silence, but in reality, his head was in a different dimension, but then something emerged.

“Wait, Professor, sorry to be rude, but doesn’t your name mean ‘runaway!?’”

“Hey! What are you saying all of the sudden, man!?”

Michael tries to reprimand Yosuke, but then he was stopped by a snicker coming from the professor.

“Haha, I’m surprised you know. That’s right, this name means ‘runaway.’ Oh, but don’t misunderstand, my parents didn’t name me this or anything. It’s an alias.”

“Whoa! Sounds real spy-like! Like running away from the bad guys!”

“Seriously, Prof? Then why’d you name yourself that?”

“Hmm... Well, you two have walked home from school, right? You probably always took the shortest route there.”

“Yes, it was more convenient that way.”

“Same here.”

Yosuke and Michael agreed with each other. They were enjoying their little talk with the professor, but they begin to ponder after hearing his words.

“Then, did you ever think of taking a different one?”

“No, there was no need to. I just wanted to go home.”

“Well, you’d be surprised to discover what you’re missing out on if you don’t explore even for just a bit. They may look normal at first, but combining them is what’s really amazing. Much like prehistoric times. Man had their lives filled with sticks and rock, but it sure took them a long time to realize bashing them together the right way would make fire.”

Michael imitated the moo of a cow in response to this, showing his disagreement.

“Well, that’s because you’re a scientist, right? It’s like, your job and calling. We’re a bit different from you geniuses.”

“Yeah, I might have to agree on Michael with this one. All I know is how to handle a spear.”

Seeing as the two were missing the professor’s point, he looks up to the sky to think of a better explanation they could relate to.

“Then, if you’re inside a burning building, would you run to the fire exit or the front door.”

The two tilted their heads to this. The answer was pretty simple. It was just basic common sense. Thinking exactly just that, Yosuke voices his thoughts.

“Well, the fire exit of course. That’s what it’s there for.”

“Hah, then you’ve lost!”

“Huh!? Why?”

“Many people think that way, too many in fact. If everyone in a panic funneled in a single doorway, it would only be a matter of time before it gets clogged, not to mention the pressure you’re getting squished at.”

“Wait, then wouldn’t it be worse at the front door!?”

“That’s what you would think, but front doors are typically larger than the fire exits. While they do vary and some have the proper design and can fit everyone on a floor, some fire exits have a terrible design that isn’t made for a lot of people to fit in, much less in a panic. If you think about it calmly, you should consider where the number of people in the room, the origin of the fire, and your distance from the second nearest exit, then you herd all the people to make sure all of them survive.”

“Wait, we need to do the last part too!?”

Michael shouts in surprise and while Yosuke stays silent, his widened eyes tell they share the same sentiments.

“Hey, you two, is that really an attitude hunters should have? You guys can literally sleep in there and still survive.”

As if realizing that only now, their heads bob, and their eyes avoid the professor’s in embarrassment. Fortunately for the professor, they made themselves perfect examples of his point.

“See what I’m saying? Even though you two aren’t actually in that situation, you only thought of escaping to live. You were thinking of the shortest path to end your predicament. If only you opened your minds more and carefully picked your options, the situation could have ended better.”

“Y-Yes, we’re sorry about that! We understand now!”

“Y-Yes, we’re sorry about that! We understand now!”

The two apologize in unison, clearly intimidated by the authority the professor was showing them.

“Well, we went on a bit of a tangent, but that’s how I got my alias. The name Shardae meaning ‘runaway’ is something I use to repent, as a reminder of my fatal mistake. I thought just like you two did, and that brought me down the worst path possible. It’s just worth noting: the shortest path does not always lead to the answer.”

As if they saw a vision of the professor’s past, Michael and Yosuke stare at him, completely perturbed. Seeing their internal plight, he tries to cheer them up.

“Hey, now, there’s no need to be shaken. It just means to get a good grasp of yourself before life shows you that you’re none the wiser. Thinking openly is a good way to avoid this.”

Despite his efforts, their expressions don’t change. They were contemplating his words. As to give them space, the professor focuses on creating his special mix. A few minutes later, Michael decides to open up.

“Um, Prof? A thought just crossed my mind.”

“Hm? What is it?”

The professor asks in a gentle voice, welcoming him.

“If you’re telling us to get smarter, that just means to grow older and gather more experience, doesn’t it? It doesn’t take out the fact that we’ll be having bad experiences sooner or later, huh?”

“Hmm, you’re right. It doesn’t. Life is like riding a bike, but it somehow just gets even more complicated every single time.”

He responds with an awkward laugh and looks back to the ground, clearly unsatisfied with the professor’s answer. In an attempt to ease the mood around them, Yosuke tries to make a light joke.

“Well, with age comes wisdom, right? That just goes to show we need to get that beard soon, man!”

“Haha... yeah...”

The response was low, clearly showing to everyone who ineffective that was. But as Yosuke was about to bring his head back down in shame, the professor follows it up.

“You two really shouldn’t misunderstand that quote.”

The two direct their attention again to him.

“It is true that getting older lets you learn more, both new knowledge and from past mistakes. But how about looking at it this way, age comes with wisdom, but how much wisdom you gain is yours to control. You two don’t need to grow beards and wait for your hair to turn gray before you start making the right choices, none of us do. If that were the case, we’d be far behind the advancements of this century.”

Their eyes widen in awe, signs of life resurfacing on their expressions. It was as if spring had arrived in their winter souls. After quite some struggle, the professor had finally gotten the two back to normal. Along with that, is the completed mixture he had been creating as he chatted, the vial taking a strange, red and white hue.

“Alright, here goes nothing!”

The professor throws the concoction at the frozen sigbin, who kept whining as its only attempt in resisting his frozen state. The three stare at the sigbin intently, hoping for a positive change to happen. Then, a few seconds later, its squeals gradually subsided, and the dark tint in its eyes turned white.

“HELL YEAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!!!”

The professor strained his voice box and squeezed the air out of his lungs in excitement, almost like a die-hard football fan had seen his team score and take the win at the very last second. His scream was so sudden that Michael and Yosuke took a step back in surprise.

“This is it! This is definitely it!! IT FINALLY WOOOORKED!!!”

Unsure of what to say in the situation, the two decide to stay silent and let the professor have his fun. It was quite clear to them how important this was to him. After a few minutes finally pass, the professor had given his next order, a sigh of relief leaving both the hunters’ breath.

“Alright! Could you guys get this to my lab? I need to examine the effects of the mixture.”

“Yeah, sure thing.”

“On it, Prof!”

“Thanks, this is a huge help!”

Michael takes the frozen sigbin and carries it with him. Meanwhile, Yosuke readies his spear on guard for any attacks. They were finally at the end of their excursion and headed back to the nearest command post. But before they do, Yosuke asked the professor one last question.

“Um, Professor, you said your name was an alias, right? Could you tell us what you’re real name is?”

“Oh, sure, that’s not a problem. I’m Zen, and I wish you two well out in this strange world.”

It had been ten years since that fateful day. I went through a lot of hardship, but I finally made it to my first milestone. Ever since I killed Zenith, I took it upon myself to repent and make it up to her. The gears are finally turning. The moment I finish this mixture will be a revolutionary feat that can finally bring the two worlds closer together than ever before.

I could not forget the words of the spirit back then. I was a hypocrite and a fool who only sought to live. No one faulted me for that when I told them. They said it was natural, but I couldn’t accept that, so I decided to create my own concept of what is right and wrong. I do not enforce this on anyone, but it is simply just there to guide me. To reach the zenith.

Zenith. I chose that name for her because it sounded cool, but looking back at it, it was perfect. If I had been better, I am certain she would be the zenith, the highest plane at which we are at our best. I was haunted by it at first, but now, I have turned it into my drive, my will to live. If people can truly reach the zenith, then I will devote myself to supporting people and spirits alike, in hopes that I, too, would someday reach that point and find her to give my apology.

I’m sorry I couldn’t meet you on the next morning of our reunion. I was truly a man of empty words. I’m sorry I couldn’t play with you for longer. I was in too much of a hurry. I’m sorry I couldn’t give you my impressions of your guardian. I couldn’t see the *you* inside it. So, for now, take a well-deserved rest, you’ve been fighting for so long. This time, I’ll deliver your unsaid words to those who need them. The very words I could hear in my head as I took your life: “Thank you for freeing me from my inner demon.”

It took me a while to notice, but you were there, conscious as the fight unfolded. I don’t have any concrete proof of how you did it, but I would like to think that you were able to make yourself conscious because of me. A direct stab into that tiyanak would have missed since they have the ability to move their core, but you were there. You prevented the core to move so that I wouldn’t miss. You were fighting along with me, I was just too blind to see it, but never again. I will devote my life, as I raise my heart toward the zenith.