**Prologue: Little Endeavor**

“Haa… They didn’t come out again…”

The owner of the disheartened voice was Yutei Yukai. She slumped onto the table in front of her, burying her head in her arms to hide her tired face. She was currently inside the popular family restaurant Joe n’ Nathan’s. She had an empty cup and plate spread in front of her.

Her cup of was refilled multiple times in the time that she did her homework. But simply completing homework or eating food was not the real reason she was spending her time there.

“Where are you… Yukou-san… Ryosei-nii-saaan~…”

Unfortunately for her, she was waiting for Senkyo and Itsuki, who teleported to the Konjou Clan to train and answer a summon. But she didn’t know that, which meant that it wasn’t going to be until nighttime until she found the people she was looking for.

“I’ve been following Yukou-san and the others for over two weeks now but I always lose them before I could try to find a way to help…”

After Yukai was rejected by Ryosei, she took her anger on her pillow by giving it a hundred small punches. She was frustrated that she was tossed aside. She wanted to prove to Ryosei that she was useful even if she couldn’t fight, and her first move happened a little over two weeks ago.

She wanted to make sure that she was going to give them something they needed. Since Yukai knew Senkyo and Ryosei would be fighting, she wanted to give them food and drinks to replenish their energy, but she wanted to make sure they needed it. Yukai thought if they already had that covered, it would only weigh on their stomachs if they ate too much.

For her first few days, she followed them to Joe n’ Nathan’s. Yukai took a seat that could see the last corner that Senkyo and the others disappeared into. However, every single time, it always took them until nighttime to come back out again. What was even weirder was that only Senkyo and Itsuki come out back out. Yukai had never seen Yuu leave with them. After that, Senkyo and Itsuki just went back to their homes looking tired. Having no idea what could’ve caused them to be that tired at the back of a restaurant left Yukai incredibly confused.

After that week ended, Yukai got her hopes up since they changed from going to Joe n’ Nathan’s to the mountains for some strange reason. This is where Yukai thought she was finally going to see them train and hoped that she could help them by bringing them food and drinks. But unfortunately, every time she tried to follow them, she would just lose them almost immediately. It was like something was preventing her from following them.

Another week passed. This time, Senkyo and the others began alternating to both the mountains and the restaurant, but her efforts saw no progress. However, the fact that she was still trying to follow them even after that much time and failure proved her incredible determination and tenacity. But that also spelled out that she was a brilliant stalker.

“They seemed so busy too… that time back in the classroom.”

Yukai was referring to the afternoon when Yuu and Shiro taught Senkyo and Itsuki about magic. She was simply walking through the halls when she heard Yuu’s voice come from what should have been an empty classroom. Upon investigating she heard all about magic.

“If only I didn’t slip and bump my head on the door, I could have heard something that they needed… Ahh, I’m such an idiooot!”

It was but an unfortunate accident. One that pulled her away from her goal.

“I guess this is another day with no progress… this isn’t working. If this keeps up, I’ll have my money to worry about. I’ve been skipping my part-time too much, and the manager is getting mad at me. I have to go back to my old schedule…”

With her depressed look, she stood up, took her bag, and headed to the toilet before she went home. She exited the cubicle and was headed to wash her hands after doing her business. But then, she suddenly stopped when she saw someone in a male high school uniform nonchalantly washing his hands in the women’s restroom.

He had short black hair and a long gym bag strapped on her back. Yukai looked around in a panic for someone to call for help but there was no one to be seen. It was just her and the intruder alone inside the restroom.

The intruder finished washing his hands and looked at the mirror in front of him where he spotted Yukai’s shocked reflection standing behind him. He turned around to face her. It was all clear to him that if he does anything at all she would scream.

Silently, with calm movements, the intruder reached inside his pocket where he took out his school identification card and slowly handed it over to her. He did so slowly so Yukai wouldn’t get frightened. Understanding the intruder’s gesture, Yukai meekly took the card away from him and examined it. And to her surprise, the card said…

“Name: Akira Ren, age: 17, sex… female?!”

Yukai quickly did a double-take and scrutinized the intruder’s person thoroughly. Specifically, the chest area. There she saw a small bump that no male would possess.

“It’s true…”

Yukai mumbled in surprise. She angled her head slightly higher and saw HER smiling at her awkwardly. Realizing how rude she was to Ren, she quickly bowed and apologized.

“I’M SO SORRY!”

“No, it’s alright. I get it all the time. It’s my fault for wearing a male uniform to begin with. I didn’t know someone was here.”

“N-No, I was also at fault for jumping to conclusions! Here, I’ll return your card. I’ll buy you something to apologize.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“I insist!”

“Thank you, but I’ll have to decline. It’s also getting dark out I need to get back home.”

“Ah, then let me accompany you. It’s dangerous to walk by yourself.”

“E-Ehh…”

Ren was utterly confused. It was just a simple misunderstanding but this girl she just met was offering to buy her something or accompany her home just to apologize. Normally, both sides would just apologize and everything would be over. But that wasn’t the case tonight.

“W-Well, for now, how about we talk outside? We’re still in the restroom after all.”

Ren left Joe n’ Nathan’s with Yukai on her tail. After that, she tried her best to brush Yukai off but she was unsuccessful. Yukai was insistent and didn’t let her go no matter how many times she gave hints that she didn’t want to get repaid. Left with no other choices, Ren reluctantly agreed to let Yukai accompany her home.

\**I’ve never seen anyone like this before. Could it be some kind of spirit influencing her? But I don’t sense any near her.\**

“This is probably rude to ask, but why are you wearing a male’s uniform, Akira-san?”

Ren’s train of thought was cut off by Yukai’s voice.

“There’s no particular reason. I just like wearing this over a girl’s uniform. I can move around perfectly plus I don’t have to worry about my skirt lifting up.”

“Ooh… That was a more girl-like reason than I thought.”

Ren replied to Yukai’s comment with a fierce gaze. There was no doubt about it, Yukai stepped on a landmine.

“I’M SORRY! I DIDN’T MEAN IT LIKE THAT! I-I just thought that you’re cuter than I expected or something like that…”

Ren heaved a sigh and spared Yukai from her deadly glare.

“You don’t need to make something up like that. Even my dad says that I’ll look cuter in a girl’s uniform. I would wear a girl’s uniform but there are a few circumstances that keep me from doing that.”

“For me, I do admit that you would look cuter in a girl’s uniform. But I think your boy’s uniform gives its own charms! At first glance, you look like a handsome high school student, but when people discover that you’re actually a girl, it gives you a unique cuteness… or something like that. In fact, some people would prefer it this way, probably!”

“O-Oh… is that so? I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks…”

Seeing Ren a bit happier, Yukai gave her a smile in return. The two continued to walk side by side while talking and getting to know more about one another. Coincidentally, their homes were in the same area which made things very convenient for them.

In their route, they had to cross over a bridge. When they got closer to the bridge, Ren stopped talking and her face turned serious. Confused about her sudden change of attitude, Yukai called her out.

“What’s wrong, Akira-san?”

“Something’s wrong. Yutei-san, stay behind me and don’t stray away from me.”

Although confused, the serious tone in her voice convinced Yukai it was something serious. She didn’t want to cause Ren any more trouble, so she decided to save the questions for later and do as she says.

They finally reached the bridge and Ren looked around frantically as they walked. Her eyes kept going from left to right cautiously looking at the guardrails of the bridge. That was when suddenly, human-like figures jumped from the river and climbed up the bridge. They had wet, green skin, slimy webbed hands and feet, and a turtle’s carapace on their back. they were well-known creatures from folklore… kappas.

“Eek! I-Is that… an actual kappa?!”

Yukai screamed in a panicked voice. Kappas blocked both ends of the bridge as well as the guardrails. They were completely surrounded. Running away wasn’t an option. Ren quickly unstrapped her bag and opened it. Without prolonging things any longer, a kappa leaped at the two, beginning the attack. Yukai was struck with fear and reflexively defended herself with her arms, but contrary to her expectations, she never felt any pain.

That was because the kappa that leaped at them was beheaded, and its lifeless body slumped to the ground. Nothing bled out from it, and the way its severed head stared at her was beyond creepy. Its head and body soon dissipated into ashes. Yukai jolted back in terror from the disgusting sight in front of her, which caused another kappa to leap at her from behind. But much like the other kappa, it was beheaded before it ever reached Yukai. The reason for that was the person beside her who was wielding a long spear. Ren.

“H-Huh…? Akira-san?”

“Stay close to me and stay down.”

Yukai responded with a light nod and crouched down behind Ren. With their comrades sliced in front of them, the kappas all began to attack. Some of them rushed at them while some leaped. They planned to overwhelm Ren with numbers. Despite the multitude of enemies attacking her from all sides, fear did not show on Ren’s face. She stayed calm and readied her weapon. With her spear resting on her right arm, the first kappa reached her attack range, and the massacre began.

A green broken piece of a gem that was attached where the blade of the spear and the pole intersected glowed as Ren made a circular slash. The slash cut down the kappas that were within the spear’s range and left a flurry of wind that cut down everything that made contact with it, making minced kappa out of the ones that dared touch it. With Ren and Yukai wrapped within the veil of razor-sharp wind, they were protected from the mob of kappas, but only for a short while.

Just before the veil of wind disappeared, Ren readied her spear and began thrusting and slashing enemies that came within her range. Her first attack dealt a huge blow to the enemy’s numbers and as well as their morale. Horrified to meet the same fate as their fallen allies, the kappas began to be cautious and observed Ren from a distance, looking for an opening.

Ren wanted to finish the fight and get out of their situation as quickly as possible. Although she could wait things out while slowly cutting down their numbers, she was worried about Yukai. As far as she knew, she was but an innocent bystander that knew nothing of the supernatural. Seeing kappas ambush them would surely take a toll on her mental state. Ren wanted to bring Yukai to a safe place, so she acted as fast as she could.

Ren placed her spear close to her hip. Intending to attack, the green gem glowed once more. She took a large step forward and thrust her spear in front of her. The closest kappa to Ren was about 4 meters away from her. It was beyond the length of her spear, which meant she could not reach it to attack… in any normal circumstance. This was, however, no normal circumstance.

The tip of her spear reached its peak and was nowhere near the closest kappa. But the screams of pain and holes that indicated something pierced through the kappas begged to differ. As she thrust her spear forward, the wind traced the tip of the spear and extended her reach with a piercing wind, putting holes in the kappas that were in the line of her thrust. The kappas were in shock, but Ren was not going to let them off easy.

Taking advantage of the enemy’s confusion, Ren continued to use her long-ranged thrusts that reached even the farthest enemy away from them. While some kappas fled to get away from her, some pushed the attack and got close to her but were met by long-ranged slashes. With trained movements, Ren stayed close to Yukai while thrusting and slashing her spear at her enemies. Her quick execution and successive combination of attacks made it seem like she was dancing with the spear. Yukai was completely protected as long as she was beside her.

With the help of her wind magic, the range on Ren’s spear extended to the end of the bridge, making it impossible for the kappas to get close enough to attack. And not long after Ren’s first thrust, the kappas retreated and the bridge was clear of enemies. It was like how it was when Ren and Yukai first got there. Empty, devoid of evil spirits.

Spirits like yokai do not leave corpses behind, rather, they disappear when they die. All the kappa that died disappeared and no one will ever see them again. Having done her job of protecting Yukai, Ren placed her spear down and called out to her.

“Yutei-san, it’s okay now. The enemies are all gone.”

“A-Akira-san…?”

Ren crouched down and reassured Yukai with a warm smile. However, Yukai was still in shock from everything. Her eyes were tearing up while she was sitting on the ground with her hands over her head.

*\*I guess this is where we part, huh? Once she recovers, Yutei-san will leave in a hurry and we’ll never meet again. What a waste… I thought we could have been friends too. This always happens when I’m friends with a normal person. Once they find out I fight things like that, they always stay away from me. Well, that’s probably the normal reaction to something like this.\**

With Yukai still in shock, Ren decided to get up and put her spear back in her gym bag. Ren turned her back to Yukai and reached out to pick up her bag. As she was putting her spear back, Yukai said something that caught Ren’s attention.

“Akira-san… was that wind magic?”

“Huh?!”

Now, it was Ren’s turn to be in shock. *\*How does someone like her know about wind magic?!\*,* she thought.

“Wh-What? How do you know about wind magic?”

“Well… there were a few circumstances. But right now… I have a lot I have to ask you!”

Yukai’s eyes lit up at Ren’s response. *\*If Akira-san didn’t deny it, then it must be true,\** she thought. This might be what she was looking for. She wants to be useful to Ryosei and the others, but since she can’t get a hold of any of them, she couldn’t do anything.

But now, with Ren, there might be a chance of her being related to Ryosei in some way. And even if she wasn’t, she could try to ask her to help get to Ryosei. It was Yukai’s first lead to getting in contact with him.

While Yukai was already celebrating her newfound friend, Ren was still left confused as to why she was smiling strangely at her. It was safe to say that Yukai was the first person who responded to her like this. The fear and shock from earlier were completely gone. However…

“…!”

“Yutei-san, you can ask your questions later. But right now, stay behind me.”

Ren took out the spear from her bag again and took a stance while facing the guardrails. She seemed to have sensed something coming for them. With her spear at the ready, she awaited the threat that was coming from the direction she was facing.

In no time at all, a humongous deformed kappa jumped from the river and hurled itself at Ren and Yukai with its mouth fully open. It intended to eat them both in one bite. The gem on Ren’s spear glowed as was about to thrust right into the center of the kappa’s mouth.

But before she could thrust her spear, a dark figure zoomed from the kappa’s side and out the other. Not even a second from when it emerged, the huge kappa was cut in half with no fighting chance.

Ren switched from a thrust to a long-ranged swipe to prevent the kappa’s dead body from hitting them. The kappa was blown away to the side. Ren looked at the kappa for confirmation, and sure enough, it was cut cleanly down the center. The question was, who or what caused that?

Ren faced the dark figure which was responsible and pointed her spear towards it. The figure stayed still without moving. But even so, Ren wasn’t about to let her guard down just because it killed the kappa for them. With a strong tension between the two sides, they failed to notice what was happening behind them.

While Ren was focused solely on the dark figure, Yukai noticed something happen to the huge kappa that didn’t happen to the other kappas. While it disappeared, a blue ball of fire appeared from it and zoomed toward the dark figure, which was then engulfed in a blue flame.

“It’s evolving!? Yutei-san, get back!”

Ren warned Yukai as she watched the dark figure bathe in a blue flame. The flame slowly began to dissipate and a figure of a human appeared from the flame.

“…Eh?”

And this particular human caught the attention of the girl hiding behind Ren.

“What the hell was that? I was inside fire but it didn’t hurt one bit. Ah, maybe this is what happens when I get a higher status? Maybe… hey, you, can you see me now?”

The owner of the carefree voice came from the man that emerged from the flame. He had black eyes and hair that had an extended part to his left tied in a red cloth. He was wearing a school uniform from a local school. His face showed that he was very troubled and seemed to think that no one could see him. And this person who just appeared in front of them was immediately recognized by Yukai.

“Ryosei-onii-san?!”

“Oh… You can see me!”

**Chapter 1: Out of Body**

A few hours earlier, inside the Konjou Clan’s castle, Senkyo was being dragged by Freda somewhere. He was inside her living quarters to respond to her summons. He was expecting to be in for a long talk with a silhouette but now he was being dragged someplace else with the real Freda dragging him in.

She took Senkyo through a door leading to a stairwell that went further down. Freda’s room was located on the ground floor of the castle which meant that Senkyo was being brought to an underground room. The stairwell was decorated with green lights inside cubbyholes in the walls. But the sources of the lights were by no means powered by electricity. They were beautiful glowing green flowers that were placed in glass vases.

“Are these bioluminescent flowers?”

*“\*They seem to be, but I don’t know why the clan would have something like this just for aesthetics.\*”*

“Those flowers are from Zerid. They are called Frodem. They grow in the forest of elves. They are my favorite flower so I thought to decorate the place with them. Do they look good?”

“Yeah, they are really beautiful. I never thought that flowers like this naturally existed. Then again, it is from another world. Is there anything else like this in Zerid?”

“Oh? Do you have an interest in flowers?”

Freda excitedly said as she brought her face closer to Senkyo.

“W-Well, not in particular. But I am curious about what other things exist in Zerid.”

Senkyo said as he took a few steps back.

“Is that so? Then that’s great! Come on, let’s go. I will show you all the beautiful plants there are in Zerid!”

Without another word, Freda hurried him down the stairs towards the exit. As they were reaching the end of the stairwell, Senkyo began to see light until finally…

“Whoaa…”

*“\*This is…\*”*

Senkyo and Ryosei were in awe as they looked around them. From every direction, they could see plants, trees, flowers, and all sorts of greenery. The entire ground was dirt and grass. At the far end of his vision, he could see a tall cliff face with a waterfall pouring down into a river that snaked to a lake. There was no such indication that they were underground, if they didn’t know any better, they would’ve thought they were on the surface.

From where Senkyo stood, he could recognize some of the plants, but there was a lot he couldn’t. Anyone could tell right away that most of the plants were very unusual because of their shape and strange patterns. They were completely unknown to him, but their beauty was undeniable.

Be that as it may, those were not the most surprising subject around them. It was the sky. Freda brought Senkyo and Ryosei underground, but despite that, there was no ceiling above their heads. Instead, there was the blue sky along with the sun and clouds. There was also no possible way for the area to be an opening on another side of the mountain since they went down a stairwell that stretched directly beneath them. The only possible explanation for this is that it was made by magic.

“Yukou-san, Konjou-san, welcome to my underground forest!”

“It’s like we’re above ground…”

“That is because of my magic, Eternal Paradise. It is a high-tier spell that uses the nature element to create a space where any plant can survive in. Of course, when I say any plant that includes plants in this world and Zerid. I made this place so I could admire the plants of both worlds!”

“So this is what high-tier magic is capable of. I expected it to be powerful but to think it could replicate even the sun… It’s mind-boggling.”

“I know right? Magic is such a wonderful thing. But just to let you know, the magic doesn’t just replicate the sun, it replicates the whole day and night cycle.”

“Seriously?!”

“Yes. Come, let me show you some of the plants we have in Zerid.”

Freda skipped excitedly as she hurried Senkyo to the nearest plant. The first one they came up to was a shrub with strange crescent-shaped leaves its smaller side covered in a blue stroke. They could hear a humming sound coming from inside the shrub. Senkyo figured they were the only ones down there. Seeing as he seems to be wrong, he asked Freda who else was present.

“Are there other people down here beside us?”

“No, there aren’t.”

“Then, is it an intruder?”

*“\*Be careful, Senkyo. If they managed to get past the clan’s defenses, there would be no doubt they are powerful.\*”*

Senkyo immediately became wary and took hold of Kuro Yaiba, ready to draw at any time. Ryosei gave Senkyo his warning and prepared to switch with him if anything went wrong. However, a short giggle came from Freda and broke the tension around Senkyo.

“There is no need to be frightened. I should have said so earlier, but that sound is coming from the shrub itself. There are no intruders in the area.”

“Eh?”

*“\*Eh?\*”*

Senkyo’s stance fell and Ryosei let his guard down at Freda’s words. After that small misunderstanding was cleared up, she continued to talk about the shrub.

“This shrub is called a Fruna. Its leaves are able to mimic any sound that it hears. The humming you are hearing now is the leaves mimicking my humming from before you arrived.”

“Is that so… that was embarrassing. We got worked up all for nothing.”

*“\*If you listen closely, it sounds exactly like Freda. So these are what plants from other worlds are capable of…\*”*

“Do not mind it. I was at fault for not explaining sooner.”

Freda stretched out her hand and plucked a leaf from the shrub and handed it over to Senkyo.

“Here, would you like to try it?”

“Of course! How does it work?”

“Hold the leaf with the blue side facing you. Say anything into it and the leaf will repeat it over and over again. From any sound you make, the blue side catches it while the green side repeats it. That is how the leaf functions.”

Senkyo brought the leaf close to his lips and said “Hello!” The leaf then began to repeat “Hello!” over and over again with Senkyo’s voice and with the same tone and volume.

“Whoa, it's working!”

“I’m glad you like it.”

Freda continued to show Senkyo and Ryosei a few more plants. They were shown trees called Arkage. They looked like any normal tree on earth and had medium-sized leaves. It could have been mistaken as such until you stretch its branch or take a leaf or a branch off and plant its base on the ground.

An Arkage’s branch is flexible. Enough that a normal person’s strength can bend it into a circle. Additionally, when planted to a surface, an Arkage’s leaves disguise themselves as that surface and hide anything behind it. When a whole branch is planted, the branch and the leaves on it become disguised.

“Amazing. This would be perfect for hiding.”

“It is. My people often use it to hide ourselves and our traps.”

The next plant was vines called Vino. They grow anywhere and are extremely dangerous. The vines slowly tangle themselves on anything that touches them. As a demonstration, Freda threw a rock at one of the vines. The rock touched a vine and continued falling down, but was caught by the tip of the vine and was soon suspended in the air with the vine wrapped around it.

Senkyo questioned why Freda kept something like this there, and her reason was because of its beauty at night. Although it looks like a normal vine in the daylight, when it is under the moon, the vines begin to constantly change colors from blue and purple. It also becomes resistant to fire.

“I wish I could show you what they look like at night. You could come back any time if you want.”

“Thank you. I’ll come by when I get the chance.”

As Freda and Senkyo approach a patch of flowers that look similar to white dandelions, Shiro suddenly appeared out of nowhere and began rolling on the flowers. It took Senkyo completely by surprise since Shiro normally wouldn’t do something like this.

“Shiro?! What are you doing?! Hey, stop that!”

Strangely enough, even with Senkyo telling Shiro to stop, she completely ignored him like she hadn’t heard him at all. While Senkyo was busy panicking and telling Shiro to stop, he did not notice that Freda was quite amused until she let out a small giggle.

“It is fine, Yukou-san. These flowers happen to be Nemi’s favorite flowers. I expected this to happen which is one of the main reasons why I decided to show you these flowers.”

“Oh, is that so? Th-Then, thank you for showing us these flowers.”

Senkyo walked up to one of the flowers and touched its white ball. To his surprise, it was incredibly soft and relaxing. The flower brushed along the palm of his hand with each of its bristles tickling his skin. When Senkyo took his hand off, it left a lingering feeling on his palm.

“These are Moltis flowers. They are very soft and durable flowers that can be used as a brush. But that is not what most of us in Zerid use it for. Moltis flowers have a healing property that heals whatever it brushes over something. Right now, you should be feeling like the flower is still brushing along the palm of your hand.”

“That’s right. It feels very relaxing.”

“That is the effect of the flower’s healing property. But since you do not have a wound, instead you are feeling the excess mana dancing around your palm, like what it is doing right now to Shiro-san.”

“I guess I can’t blame her. If you rolled around a patch of these flowers, it might become a habit.”

“That is true. But that is not the only effect that it has on Shiro-san or Nemi in general.”

“What do you mean?”

“As you may or may not know, Nemi have a protective barrier that protects them from magical attacks. That barrier is powered by Shiro-san’s mana. As long as she has mana, her barrier will stay active.”

“Oh, I never knew the last part. But what does that have to do with Shiro and the Moltis flowers?”

“If you aren’t injured, any healing magic cast on you will not immediately disappear but will instead linger around at the location where it was cast on. Exactly what you experienced earlier. But since Nemi have a magical barrier that uses mana, what do you think would happen if excess mana were to play around her body?”

“…Would she absorb it?”

“Correct. Her barrier absorbs the excess mana from the Moltis flowers and converts it into her own. But her barrier’s mana absorption is not only limited to excess mana. All Nemi’s protective barriers can absorb exposed mana and turn them into their own.”

“Exposed mana? Is that…”

When Senkyo heard the term, he began to think about it carefully and remembered Yuu’s words from the other day she taught them about magic.

\**By having mana around you, it creates the phenomenon called Element Ingression. Element Ingression is what allows the person who released the mana to be able to use the power of the 11 elements.\**

That gave him an inkling of what that meant, and so, to confirm his suspicions, Senkyo asked Freda about it

“Freda-san, by ‘exposed mana’ does that mean magical spells like fireballs or thunderbolts?”

“Exactly! Wow, you catch on fast!”

Since magic is, to put it simply, just mana that was shaped by spells. If you were to take away the mana from any magic, it would become nothing. This means that Shiro’s barrier extracts the mana in the air, disabling magic with unprotected mana such as fireballs.

Thinking about it logically, Shiro was able to protect Senkyo from Fulgur’s powerful attack that would have left him dead, despite being newly released from her seal. Shiro expanded her magical barrier to Senkyo and deflected all of Fulgur’s attacks, that was what he thought at first. But now, with what he heard from Freda, he knew that instead of *deflecting* all of Fulgur’s attacks, Shiro *absorbed* it all and used the mana she gained from it to cast other spells to heal him. As Senkyo was thinking this, Freda added something.

“But do not think that Nemi are invincible to magic. Absorbing magic from exposed spells is a conscious act. If someone were to attack her with magic while she is asleep, it will damage her directly without getting absorbed by the barrier. Also, they can only absorb exposed magic. Magic similar to field circles, barriers, or curses cannot get absorbed.”

“I see… that was very informative, thank you very much.”

“Oh, no, it was nothing.”

As Freda and Senkyo were talking, Shiro came up to Senkyo, seemingly satisfied with her time rolling around as she was wearing a huge smile on her face.

“Onii-chan, Onii-chan, do you want to play on the flowers with Shiro?”

“…Ahaha, I think I’ll pass. Rolling around in flowers isn’t really my thing.”

“Do you not like it?”

“Well, I think it’s a matter of dignity rather than hating it.”

“Hehe, I see she’s still quite energetic.”

With Freda’s comment, Shiro hid behind Senkyo and suddenly glared at her with distrust.

“Shiro doesn’t know what you plan to do with Onii-chan, but Shiro will make sure to keep an eye on you.”

Shiro then entered a short jump and suddenly disappeared into thin air.

“Ah, there she goes. Sorry about that, Freda-san. Shiro seems to only trust me and Hisho-chan, so she’s a bit aggressive to others.”

“That is fine. No one would trust a stranger, after all. There is no need to apologize since she is merely being careful. Besides you might have a hard time believing me later.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s something I want to talk to you about. But this isn’t a place for that. I’ll lead you to my home.”

Senkyo followed Freda as they walked through the forest. She lived in the trees, specifically, the largest tree in the area that was located between the river and the lake. There were stairs that wrapped around the tree that led to the top where her home was located. The tree they were on was connected to the rooms on top of the other nearby trees by wooden bridges. They were different facilities like an archery range, a library, or vacant bedrooms.

Freda chose to talk with them at a place with a great view of the whole area, and that was her main tree’s terrace. It had a great view of the nature around them along with the lake and the streaming waterfall. Freda served Senkyo a cup of tea while sitting around a wooden table and began talking.

“One of the reasons why I called you here was to know you better. However, the main reason is different. I called you here because I wanted to talk to you about an important issue that involves all three worlds. But first, Yousuke-san has informed you about the truth of the Konjou Clan, right?”

“Yes. We talked together in private yesterday after the battle.”

**…………**

At the end of the Hunter Battle Royale, Yousuke called Senkyo alone to his office. When he entered, he was met with Konjou Yousuke, Yamazaki Dai, and Sakurai Kosuke. Having proven his legitimacy, they filled in Senkyo and Ryosei about the events in the Konjou Clan in the past 6 years, as well as the secrets that were now common knowledge before that.

When Ryosei was still alive, there was a secret group within the Konjou Clan. Instead of being tasked with protecting the people from invading demons and evil spirits, they were tasked to go on expeditions to the Spirit Realm, a world that only a handful of people knew existed at the time.

They explored the Spirit Realm in hopes of understanding it better. After a lot of hardship, they eventually figured out how that world functioned and the true reason why evil spirits were appearing on earth.

The spirit realm has 3 sections. The Zerid-Spirit World, Earth-Spirit World, and Spirit World. The Zerid-Spirit World and Earth-Spirit World are the middle ground between the two worlds and the true spirit world. These sections are where the spirited souls of their respective worlds are sent to.

Senkyo and Ryosei have only gone to the earth-spirit world, but they never reached the true spirit world. Only true spirits have the power to travel to the true spirit world. Unless invited by a true spirit, spirited souls and other beings will never be able to reach the spirit world.

All spirits have a few things in common. They have cores, the symbol of their existence. Cores are like the hearts of humans. If all cores of a spirit are broken, they will die. They are unable to use mana and rely on spirit power to maintain their existence.

In the Spirit Realm, there are two kinds of spirits: True Spirits and Spirited Souls. True spirits are the spirits that are born in that world. They can maneuver their cores around their body and wield multiple weapons. Meanwhile, spirited souls are the souls of beings that died on Earth or Zerid. Souls of the dead are usually reincarnated immediately, but there are also times when their soul unconsciously refuses to reincarnate due to strong emotion or unfulfilled desire. This puts them in a deciding period causing them to create a spirit zone.

This period is the fork to reincarnating or becoming a spirited soul. If the soul’s complications disappear, they are reincarnated. But if that period runs out, the soul is reborn in the spirit realm without its memories and becomes a spirited soul. They are reborn with a weapon as a manifestation of their resolve and desire. Their cores are directly connected to their weapons. Usually, spirited souls have their cores where their hearts would normally be, and they are not able to move them like true spirits. However, when they summon their weapons, their cores are immediately transferred to the weapon They will also gain the ability to move around their souls, but they can only move it inside their weapons.

If a spirited soul’s desire is fulfilled or if they achieve inner peace, they can choose to reincarnate. But despite the danger, there are also times when spirited souls refuse to reincarnate and choose to live in this world. There are various reasons out there. But the most common one is: to reach a higher level of being. Becoming a god.

There are statuses in the spirit realm that determine their power and capabilities. They are reached depending on the amount of spirit power a spirit possesses. From the lowest to the highest status, there exists ghost, eidolon, revenant, spirit, seer, visitant, guardian, sentinel, demigod, and god. As spirits achieve higher statuses, they are granted a new ability

Ghost. Is the lowest status and only have the base abilities to manifest their weapon, glimpsing and visiting the world they came from. Visiting is the power to create a distorted spiritual body that you can use to be seen in the world you died in. It is incomplete and is limited to an hour of manifestation. It is normally only used to gain spirit power. While manifesting, ghosts can only move around materials with their spirit power but are unable to make contact with physical objects. Meanwhile, glimpsing is the ability to see the exact location you are in from one world to another. This rank is the starting rank of all spirited souls and is only available to them.

Eidolon. A status in which the spirited soul can reinforce their weapon and regenerate them if damaged. Otherwise, a ghost’s weapon will never regenerate its damage making it dangerous for them to enter battle.

Revenant. It gives the spirited soul the ability to manifest its form in one of the living worlds. Unlike visiting, it fully manifests an identical copy of what they looked like when they were alive and has a great increase in its limitations ranging from 12 to 24 hours of manifestation. Aside from those, the spirited souls are still only able to manifest in the world they previously died in and are unable to make contact with physical objects.

Spirit. The lowest status for true spirits and the status every single one is born with. To spirited souls, when they reach this status, their spirit power greatly increases along with their resolve and durability of their weapon. Additionally, they are able to use a skill true spirits use, spirit expansion. The ability to stretch their spiritual body using spirit power. Spirits can become bigger but they cannot shrink smaller than their original body size.

Seer. Evolves the glimpse ability spirits have and enables the spirit to have the power to glimpse into all worlds. Whether they are in one world or the other, they will have the ability to see the surrounding area of the other two worlds in that specific location.

Visitant. Grants the spirit the ability to manifest itself in all three worlds. Spirits of seer status or lower are only able to manifest their spiritual body in two worlds including the spirit realm.

Guardian. The spirit receives the ability to guard a living being. This status is defined by humans as a guardian angel. By becoming a living being’s guardian angel, the spirit will be forced to follow them around and guard them in exchange for spirit power. The spirit is free to stop being a guardian angel and release itself at any time.

Sentinel. It blesses the spirit with the same effects of the previous Spirit status but on a greater scale. Furthermore, it is comprised of 4 stages. In each stage, the spirit is granted an additional core, much like receiving multiple lives, and is also granted more power. Resulting in the spirit obtaining 5 cores and incredible power after completely evolving from this status.

Demigod. It grants the spirit the power to control a force of their specialty. Depending on the spirit’s previous achievements, its cores transform and enable the spirit to specialize in that force. An example of this is a to-be God of the sea can control water in some way.

God. So far there are no known spirits that have successfully become a god. Resulting in a lack of information.

Aside from the status of guardian and above, spirit power is acquired if a spirit accepts offerings given to them, grants someone’s prayers to them, acquires emotions directed to them, if someone becomes aware of them or recognizes their existence, and lastly, collecting other spirit’s spirit power by breaking their core.

In a battle between spirits, there is a different system. Spirit power is everything. It is their lifeforce and their source of power. They can only take damage through mana and other spirits’ spirit power; physical attacks do not work. In making contact with another spirit, they will not take damage unless the spirit has an intent to kill the other. Weapons are not necessary to kill amongst spirits. Even their bodies are enough.

When spirits become desperate in battle, they can enter a rampaging state. This state of a spirit is when they lose control over themselves due to negative emotions. To humans, they are called evil spirits. In this state, spirits can make contact with physical objects. It was found in the expeditions that rampaging spirits can be reverted to their normal selves if they are calmed down. However, if left alone, they will remain in that state and can become permanent.

“That was everything. Did you get all that?”

Yousuke gazed at Senkyo questioningly as he finished his long lecture.

“Yeah, we pretty much got all that. But if that’s the case, when we were fighting hollowed knights, even before one of them manifested they were able to make contact with us, why is that?”

“That is because you were in the spirit realm. Anything in the spirit realm, living being or not, can be touched by spirits. It’s the reason why END uses spirit lanterns. They take advantage of this fact to isolate their enemies and to allow spirits like the hollowed knights to provide backup. Do you have any more questions?”

“Then, about Ryosei. You said that when a soul turns into a spirited soul, then their memories are wiped out and they are sent to the spirit realm. Then why is it that after 6 years, Ryosei was still inside his spirit zone with his memories still intact? Does that mean spirit zones differ from soul to soul?”

“…We do not know. Spirits zones of a soul can range from a day to a whole week, but we have never encountered a spirit zone that lasted 6 years. In fact, there should be no possible way for a hunter or a demon to miss a spirit zone lasting that long. But for his memories, we theorize that it’s because he was never properly turned into a spirited soul, to begin with. When you found him, he just merged with your body and became a spirited soul that way along with his memories.”

“I see, that does sound probable… Then, this will be the last question. Who is Freda and what did she do here?”

“…About that, she requested for her to be the one to tell you about herself. Which is why she was asking for you two to meet her tomorrow after school. If you want to know about her, then answer her summons tomorrow.”

“Okay, I’ll be sure to be there.”

“Good. But now that we’re officially allies, we’d like to know exactly what you are, Yukou-kun. An example of that is that pillar of light that restored Touma-kun.”

“Huh?”

Senkyo paused for a moment and tried to recall his memories, but he couldn’t remember anything that Yousuke said. Just as he was about to ask him, Ryosei took control of his body.

“Yo, You-chan. Its Ryosei. About that, Senkyo doesn’t know anything about it. And I think it would be better not to. It’s a bit of a selfish thing to say, but could you not ask about that?”

Yousuke sharpened his gaze on Ryosei. He returned the gesture with a serious face and kept their intense glare on each other in complete silence.

“We may be cousins, Ryosei. But do you really think that I’ll overlook something this large of a scale? We cut the live broadcasting from the whole clan but all five judges still saw exactly what happened.”

“Doesn’t that mean that you made that decision in concern for us? How thoughtful of you.”

“For now, it’s private. But if you share your powers with us, we will be able to think of ways to utilize it! This could save many hunters in battles and could give us a chance to finally take down END! Why would you stay quiet about it!?”

“Although that may certainly be true, there’s something you don’t understand, You-chan. I have no idea what Senkyo is truly capable of. Not me, nor himself. I have seen his power firsthand, and from what I gather, it is not something that can be forcibly obtained. We lack information. If we are too hasty, it could backfire on us horrendously. Knowing this, do you still want us to give you completely theorized information?”

Yousuke seemed to be out of words. He was troubled by what Ryosei said.

“Theorized information, huh…”

If what Ryosei was saying was true, then it would indeed be reckless to experiment on unknown power. On the other hand, that power was what they needed to get an upper hand on END. It was undeniable that Senkyo’s power was in its infancy, they needed to cultivate that, but the problem was that no one knew how to do that. After racking his brain, Yousuke came to a decision.

“…Fine, for now, you can keep that to yourselves. But if you ever find something out, I shouldn’t have to remind you to share it with us.”

Ryosei directed a smile at him, almost as if he had been expecting this outcome.

“I already know that. Well then, we should end this here. It’s getting late.”

**…………**

*“\*I assume you’re not going to tell me anything about that conversation, huh?\*”*

*“\*No, but you don’t mind that, do you?\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

They were reminded of the events that happened yesterday. Ever since then, Ryosei never told Senkyo about what he meant, but even so, he didn’t try to pursue it. Seeing as Senkyo didn’t want to continue the conversation, they resumed their focus on Freda.

“So, what is this issue exactly?”

Freda kept her gaze fixated on Senkyo. She closed her eyes looking quite troubled. When she reopened them, she made a strange request.

“I apologize if I am being rude, but may I ask that Shiro-san and Konjou-san leave your body?”

“Hm? Is there a problem with them being here?”

“This issue isn’t exactly easy to convey. If possible, I would like nothing to influence your decision. I’m very sorry.”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing to be sorry about.”

Senkyo asked Shiro and Ryosei to temporarily leave them alone. Shiro appeared and slowly walked away while wearing a doubtful face. It was obvious she didn’t want to leave Senkyo alone, but she forced herself to leave.

As for Ryosei, Freda suggested him to visit the spirit realm. Since he was technically a spirit, he should be able to create a spiritual body in the spirit realm. Ryosei couldn’t deny that he also wanted to check the spirit realm.

After a short while, it was decided that Ryosei would return to Freda and get her attention by visiting her if his rank was below a revenant so that she can bring him back. She sent him to the spirit realm by drawing a circle on the ground, exactly like how Sora sent them back to Earth. At this moment, Senkyo and Freda were all alone.

“Well then, can we proceed?”

“That choice is yours to decide.”

“What do you mean?”

Freda sharpened her gaze on Senkyo. It was obvious from the atmosphere that this was no laughing matter. Senkyo inadvertently gulped and tensed up.

“Yukou-san, what I am about to tell you may change your life forever. I have not told anyone about this ever since I arrived here except for the chief, Yamazaki-san, and Kosuke-san. This is something that is only meant for you, and you alone. Once you choose to hear what I am about to say, there will be no turning back. You will never be able to return to a peaceful life. Now, I will ask you, do you want me to proceed?”

Having heard Freda’s warning, he pondered.

*\*She has mistaken something. What she’s telling me is something that already happened. My life changed the moment I made contact with Ryosei, but I don’t regret that. I was long past the point of no return. The only path for me is straight forward.\**

“I…”

\**To survive, I need power. To be able to solve the mysteries around me, I need information. The correct decision was all too obvious.\**

“…”

*\*But still.\**

“…”

*\*I hesitated.\**

“…Choose to proceed.”

*\*I made my decision. I forced myself to. I tried to kill my own emotions to make the right choice, but I ignored something important. Little did I know that ignoring something that was right in front of me, that turning a blind eye to my weakness, would lead me to make the worst decision possible.\**

**…………**

Ryosei was sent to the spirit realm. Senkyo and Freda were gone and his whole environment changed. The time of day turned to night and small particles floated around him. He was on his lonesome, which is why he took a while to notice that he was in his normal body instead of a floating flame.

“I’m here… Senkyo should be fine on his own. Freda wasn’t lying so there’s no need to worry. For now…”

Ryosei jumped off Freda’s tree house and walked up to the river beside it.

“So, this is what I look like.”

He saw his reflection on the water’s surface. He was wearing his old school uniform, the very ones he wore on his death. But unlike a normal human being, Ryosei’s body was producing small flames. His hair flowed like a burning flame as well as some parts of his body and clothes.

He stared at the palm of his hand and closed his eyes. Seconds later, a small circular pearl appeared.

“Hm? What is this? Did I do something wrong?”

Ryosei was trying to summon his weapon. He was told that spirits summoned weapons the same as a hunter using spirit power. But for some reason, no matter how many times he released and re-summoned his weapon. The only thing that appeared was the small pearl in front of him.

“Now that I think about it… using magic and spirit power is pretty similar.”

Magic is the result of chanting to shape mana and casting to materialize magic. Meanwhile, using spirit power is the result of using resolve to be able to use it and the desire to produce a certain outcome.

“I’ve only been trying to summon my weapon, but maybe I still need to use spirit power to shape it?”

With the pearl in the palm of his hand, Ryosei used his spirit power on it. The pearl then expanded and transformed into a familiar shape. A black blade with a red streak down its center. The legendary blade of the Konjou clan, Kuro Yaiba.

“Nice, it worked!”

Now that Ryosei was able to summon his weapon, he was safe to wander around the spirit realm. Ryosei headed for the exit and headed to leave the castle. In his way, he did not see any other people or spirits. There would always be some spirits lurking around in the shadows hiding from them, but the fact that he didn’t sense any other presence was proof that there were none. Despite this strange circumstance, Ryosei didn’t find it strange.

He surfaced and walked through the town, but it was all the same. The houses and buildings were the same, but it was deprived of any presence until he finally reached the town’s barrier.

“Looks like it’s still working fine. The town’s barrier not only keeps people away, but spirits along with it. Mom sure worked hard on this.”

Ryosei lifted his foot off the ground and crossed the barrier. There, he was finally able to sense other presences.

“Hmm… but what’s with this? I can only sense three spirits in the area. I was expecting a lot more.”

Ryosei thought it was strange but he put it to the back of his mind and continued to walk down the mountain. An eerie silence accompanied Ryosei’s footsteps. All he could see around him were trees and leaves that shined like crystal stones. It was always nighttime in the spirit realm but Ryosei could see his surroundings as clear as day.

Is the source of the light the particles around him or does everything in this world have its own source of light? It was a question that troubled every spirit realm researcher and goes unanswered to this day. It naturally popped up in Ryosei’s head while he observed in silence. The reason for that was most likely his latest encounter with Senkyo’s divine soul.

Similar to how Ryosei thought it was pointless to think hard about whether an object of the spirit realm radiated light or not, he thought it was pointless to know how Senkyo obtained a divine soul. Divine souls are received from someone’s birth, so it was natural to not think too much about their origin. But if that were truly the case, then why was it that Fulgur seemed to know about the soul? Why is it that the soul cares enough about its master to save someone else’s life? And why was it that the soul continues to hide its existence from its master?

Ryosei’s mind was bombarded by many other questions like this but not a single answer to accompany them. Despite having all of Senkyo’s memories from birth, he was still a mystery to him. That just goes to show how much he was being kept in the dark, by his father, Shiro, the divine soul, and perhaps other beings he has yet to encounter.

“Haah…How troublesome can this one person be?”

As Ryosei was thinking to himself, he noticed something odd.

“Hm? The two other presences are gone. There’s only one left… and it’s—”

Before Ryosei could even finish processing his thought, black feathers came flying towards him from within the trees. Ryosei swiftly dodged them and ran behind a tree for cover. The feathers were strong enough to stick to the ground where he previously was.

Just before he hid, he took a glance at the source of the feathers only to see a shadow fly off and disappear into the trees, but that did not imply it was gone. The leaves rustled and gusts of wind came from all directions. Ryosei summoned his pearl, but he didn’t transform it into Kuro Yaiba.

The movements stopped, which meant that whatever was after Ryosei either left or found an opening. Ryosei immediately figured out it was the latter as he sensed a presence behind him. Even though he was behind a tree, whoever was attacking intentionally positioned themselves behind it. Relying on his senses, he quickly crouched low to the ground. Not a second later, a blade cut through the tree and knocked the severed trunk away with the force of its swing.

Ryosei turned around to swing his hand containing the pearl and transformed it into Kuro Yaiba as he completed his swing, but the shadow was too fast and disappeared back into the trees. It secured its escape by launching sharp feathers at Ryosei, forcing him to defend himself. Unfortunately for the shadow, Ryosei wasn’t about to let it escape from him this time. Now that he knew the enemy was directly in front of him, Ryosei used flash strike to catch up to it.

“Ka!?”

The shadow cried out in surprise when it saw Ryosei appear right beside him. Black wings expanded on its back and flapped them downwards sending it upward at high speed. Ryosei followed by using flash strikes repeatedly between the trees to repel him upwards.

*\*Clash!\**

In the clear sky above the trees, Ryosei was able to see exactly who the attacker was. It was a crow with a man’s body with black wings on its back. It donned traditional Japanese clothing and was holding a katana in its right hand. He recognized it was a yokai from Japanese mythology that was said to resemble a mix between old men and birds, a Tengu. However, the tengu in front of him had a head of a raven instead of an old man. That meant that it was one of the Karasu Tengu (Crow Tengu).

It glared viciously at Ryosei as they clashed blades in the night sky. It expanded its wings and propelled itself backward while shooting out feather blades. Ryosei wasn’t able to deflect them fast enough due to the close distance and got hit. Having nothing to support his body, he plummeted to the ground, but he was still void of fear. While falling out of the sky, he pointed his blade in the exact opposite direction of the tengu.

“Magic arts: Crackling Thunder!”

“KA!?”

The tengu, who thought Ryosei was about to meet a cruel end to the ground, was severed in half when a burst of lightning appeared behind Ryosei and sliced through him with it. It was severed from its lower body, so it tried to calm down and keep afloat, but to its surprise, its wings refused to listen to it. It was paralyzed, resulting in its unceremonious fall to the hard ground.

Ryosei slowly walked up to the tengu. Seeing as it was still moving meant its core was still intact. It dropped its katana when it fell, leaving only its wings as its weapons. It stared at Ryosei in shock.

“Ka… What in the world are you?”

“Me? No one important.”

Ryosei grabbed the tengu and threw it next to a tree. With the pearl in his hand, he transformed them into ropes and bound the tengu to the tree.

“Ka!? What was that!?”

“Nothing important. Setting that aside, I have some questions I want to ask you. I’m warning you, if you don’t answer…”

“KA!!”

The tengu felt a sharp pain running through its body. He immediately realized it was the rope.

“Wasn’t this a katana before!? Why is it a rope now!?”

“You don’t have time to worry about that. Right now, if you don’t answer me, I’ll make my ropes hurt you until you die out. If you try to fight back by damaging my ropes with your body, I’ll tighten the rope and end you immediately. Do you understand?”

The tengu gulped in fear and slowly nodded its head. Ryosei was using how spirit power works to his advantage. If he doesn’t intend to kill it, then the tengu won’t get hurt or lose spirit power. But if he does, then that pain will immediately run through its whole body.

Usually, 90% of a spirit’s spirit power is compressed in the core and it uses the remaining 10% to create a spiritual body. A spirit will automatically regenerate its body, but even that would take a while to complete. This was why Ryosei had an ample amount of time to finish his interrogation before the tengu can regenerate its lower body.

“Ka… Fine, what do you want?”

Seeing his disadvantageous position, the tengu decided to comply.

“First of all, why did you try to assassinate me?”

“Ka, Assassinate? What a vulgar word. ‘Subdue’ fits better in this situation. A spirited soul like you wouldn’t die from having their heads severed from their bodies. As long as your weapon is intact, you’ll be fine.”

“…”

As much as Ryosei would like to deny it, the tengu was saying the truth. On top of that, he didn’t sense any lies. Although cutting his head off wouldn’t kill him, it would temporarily take his vision, hearing, and smell.

“K-K-K-KAA!!”

“Answer the question.”

Ryosei tightened the rope to hurt him for a few seconds as punishment for trying to dodge his question.

“Ka… Fine, fine. It’s because you appeared from that dome of light. A dome of mysterious light that no one has been able to cross over. If someone walks out of there, then they must be something special!”

“A dome of light…”

The tengu was talking about the Konjou clan’s barrier. Its power was strong enough to deny entry to those unwelcome and durable to defend against any attacks on it. Such was the power of Ryosei’s mother.

“If that’s the case, then severing my head would only give you a second at most. This is a spiritual body, not a human’s. I can still see without my eyes, you know?”

“Ka? What are you saying? I’ve never heard of a spirited soul seeing without its eyes before.”

“…Is that so?”

As a test, Ryosei closed his eyes and focused his mind. Just as he was expecting, he was able to see outlines of his surroundings. He saw the tengu tilt its head in confusion at his actions. To the tengu, Ryosei simply closed his eyes, eliminating his vision. It thought about escaping but gave up the moment it realized the rope was too tight to stretch its wings.

Ryosei then reopened his eyes.

“Hm, you’re right. I wonder why I thought that.”

He decided to feign ignorance, hiding a skill that seemed to be uncommon amongst spirited souls.

“Ka… Are you sure you’re not insane? Ah, you must be a newborn! Kukuku, of course you’d be confused, huh?”

Although he didn’t understand the tengu’s logic, he decided to play along.

“Sure, let’s go with that. Anyway, I need someone who lives in this world to help me out here. So tell me how to check my status as a spirit is.”

“Kukuku… such a thing doesn’t exist. The only way for you to make sure is to test if you can perform the new skills in every status. You seem to be versed in statuses, but I should remind you that newborns begin with ghosts—”

“Yeah, sure. More importantly, why are you the only spirit around here? Shouldn’t there be others?”

“Kuu… such a rude youngin. If you’re looking for refined true spirits like me, most of them are in the spirit world. And spirits like you are most likely away from here.”

“And why is that?”

“Ka! The land dragon will arrive today! A true spirit that originated from three towns away searching for spirit cores to eat. From the last time I heard, its status is close to a seer. It takes cores or weapons with its lightning-fast tongue. The only other obstacle that prevents other spirits from killing it is its thick armored scales. Since nothing so far has penetrated its scales, I assume that its core is staying steady in its center.

“Why exactly are you explaining this in detail? I didn’t ask for that much.”

“Ka… How sharp. I want you to kill it for me. Seeing as what you’ve done to me, I won’t be able to fly fast enough to escape its tongue.”

“Do you understand the situation you’re in? Why would I do that?”

“Ka! You need a guide to this world, don’t you? If you manage to make it out, I will become your ally. I can even send you to the spirit world if you want. And you don’t even have to look for me since I live on this mountain. Just call and I’ll be here. This is the greatest offer yet, don’t you think?”

“Really now? Then how do I know you aren’t lying and planning to send me to a trap for revenge? In the first place, how am I sure you’ll actually come back to me?”

“Ka. You’ll just have to decide for yourself. A high risk for a high reward is fair after all.”

He was telling the truth, but Ryosei pondered for a bit. Although the tengu only offered uncertain benefits, having those services would serve him useful in the future. He was sure the tengu is trying to gain something from this offer besides safety, perhaps his power, but other than that he was unsure. From the tengu’s description of the enemy, it seemed like something he could take on. If ever he’s wrong, then he could just retreat for safety. There would be no need to complete a shady request if it would put his life on the line.

“…Fine, I’ll take you up on that offer.”

Ryosei grabbed the rope and reverted it back to a small pearl.

“So, when is this thing supposed to appear—”

\**BOOOM!!!\**

The ground shook intensely, shaking the leaves off the trees around them. The source of the shaking was coming from the town. Ryosei quickly climbed the nearest tree to investigate and saw a giant lizard dig itself out of the ground and began walking around town.

“Ka! There it is! Now, be on your way!”

The tengu hovered beside him, with its wings unparalyzed keeping it afloat. It was certainly a strange sight to see a flying upper body without a bottom.

“What an annoying crow. At least tell me your name.”

“Ka… I thought I was about to get away. My name is Shin.”

“Ok, then. I’m warning you, if you don’t keep your end of the deal, the next time we meet, you’ll be in for more than just a missing lower body.”

Having said his parting words, Ryosei jumped off the tree and maneuvered down the mountain towards the town.

“KA! Where are you going!? You haven’t even told your name yet!”

“I’ll think about it the next time we meet.”

Without another word, Ryosei took off down the mountain.

*\*That crow is more scheming than it appears. It’s trying to become allies with me because of my power. In that fight, I instinctively used mana to cut him down. But in this world, casting mana is impossible. Not even I knew until I used it. It must be because of Senkyo again. I have no idea what effect he had on me, but right now, I’m not a spirited soul nor a true spirit. I’ll have to find out what caused me to meet him in the first place. To do that, I need to reach the spirit world for information. And since I know everything that tengu said was true, once I take this lizard on, I’ll have access to it whenever I want to!\**

When Ryosei arrived in town, he perched himself on a four-story building to observe his target. At a closer look, the giant lizard had a grotesque figure. It possessed a long human mouth with huge eyeballs gouging out and squinted vertically. Its body was covered in scales with sharp spikes sticking out its back all the way to the tip of its tail.

He summoned his pearl and poured spirit power into it. The pearl shined brighter and looked much smoother. He reinforced his weapon to confirm his status. At this moment he determined he was at least on an eidolon status.

Moving to the next step, he tried to manifest himself on earth. He saw the blue-colored sky and the people walking on the streets below. When he looked at his arm, it was a distorted black shadow. After seeing enough, he brought himself back to the spirit realm.

“Well, that confirms it. I’m an eidolon. If I was a revenant, I should’ve seen my own hand. Let’s see… I’m an eidolon while that thing is a spirit that’s about to rank up to a seer. It has more spirit power than me but that doesn’t mean I won’t be able to beat it. I beat that tengu, earlier using magic, but I shouldn’t do that with this one. He’s probably observing me so I should refrain from showing him what I’m capable of, just in case he stabs me in the back after he keeps his word.”

Ryosei planned out his plan of attack, but he didn’t know what his limits were. The only time he’s fought as a spirit was back when he saved Yukai from the dream demon. He was unsure whether he could fight like that in the spirit realm since he fought that demon in the mind.

“I guess this will be the perfect time to test my limits.”

Ryosei reshaped the pearl to Kuro Yaiba and turned around, only to find the lizard he was observing had climbed up the building and had its mouth open, ready to feast on his core.

“Shit!”

The lizard’s tongue shot out of its mouth and launched directly at Ryosei but was met with the empty air behind him. Ryosei used flash strike to escape and slashed the lizard’s side with Kiro Yaiba, but its scales deflected the attack.

Ryosei landed safely on the ground and made some distance between them. The lizard faced him and shot out its tongue once more. Ready for its attack, he dodged the tongue and disappeared into the nearest building.

“Its tongue is incredibly long and attacking the scales on his back is out of the question. Then, let’s try this…”

The lizard approached the building Ryosei entered and peeked through the windows. All of the sudden, a shadow appeared above it. Using its instincts, the spikes on the lizard’s back extended upwards and pierced the shadow. The sound of wood getting destroyed was heard upon contact. The lizard turned sideways to see what it hit was a table and what was left of it was scattered on the ground.

\**Whoosh!!\**

The moment the lizard took its eyes off the building, it felt something sharp slash its skin. Ryosei sneaked up to the lizard while it was distracted and attacked it. He hit the lighter-colored part of its skin which appeared on its bottom half. Unlike when he tried to pierce its dark green scales earlier, his current slash left a mark on it, releasing small particles as Kuro Kaiba slid through its body. But it wasn’t enough to completely penetrate it.

The lizard let out an intimidating scream and trampled on the ground below it. Its impact made small craters but Ryosei was already gone.

“As I suspected, its bottom half is weaker than the rest. I should aim there but I still can’t pierce it.”

Ryosei analyzed the lizard from further down the street behind it. He pondered on what to do next. Unlike using the physical form of Kuro Yaiba, its spirit form’s sharpness was dependent on its status and spirit power. He was still in the 2nd to lowest rank which meant Kuro Yaiba didn’t have its usual sharpness.

“If that’s the case, then I’ll have to bring down the lizard’s spirit power.”

Ryosei ran further down the road before calling out to the lizard.

“Heeey! I’m over here you creepy reptile!”

The lizard heard Ryosei’s scream and quickly turned his way. Upon seeing him, without hesitation, it shot out its long, slimy tongue. Ryosei dodged it but the tongue made a sudden curve and followed Ryosei.

Dodge after dodge, the lizard’s tongue followed Ryosei around. When the tongue was long enough, he ran towards the lizard as he was being chased down by its tongue from behind. He then used flash strike to reach the base of its tongue and cut it off, releasing a spark of particles.

Ryosei jumped away before he was trampled but the lizard wasn’t going to let him catch a break. All the spikes above its back stretched out and pursued Ryosei like missiles. He dodged one of them and tried to cut them but Kuro Yaiba didn’t pierce it. He released his weapon instead of pulling it out to not get caught by the other spikes heading his way. The spikes were as hard as its dark green scales so his only choice was to run away.

Left and right, up and down, the spikes scattered everywhere to the point where its tips began hitting their own spikes and destroying each other. Hiding behind its other spikes and using its power against it was an effective move. His elegant dance of death caused the lizard to destroy itself.

With most of the lizard’s defenses out of commission, Ryosei went for the offensive. He ran up to the lizard and stabbed both of its eyes, taking away its ability to see. The lizard began to lose its control and attacked with its tail at random. Its tail extended and flayed wildly, destroying building after building but was unable to hit Ryosei.

The lizard finally regenerated its body’s lost portions and spotted Ryosei standing in front of it, taunting him. Enraged, the lizard began screeching. Slowly, the lizard’s size became larger and larger. At the end of its screech, it was about three times the size it was earlier.

All at once, the lizard shot out its tongue and all its spikes. Dodging became a harder task, but that meant that it was going to be quicker for the lizard’s attacks to hit each other. Ryosei dodged, jumped, ran, climbed, slid, rolled, and weaved through all of its attacks. Without rest and losing pace, Ryosei avoided death by the millimeter.

What came with its rage was its loss of reason, it cared not how much the lizard hit itself as long as it could reach the annoying nuisance that was Ryosei. Every time it missed Ryosei by a few millimeters only served to enrage it even further and continued to launch its attacks without care. It was only until it saw Ryosei standing still did it realize that its spikes were all destroyed, its tongue pierced with holes and its size back to normal. The lizard was an open target.

“Heh, this is checkmate.”

Sensing it’s inevitable peril, the lizard made a last-ditch effort and tried to run away.

\**Whoosh!!\**

Unfortunately for the lizard, there was no escape in the face of Konjou Ryosei. The lizard was cut cleanly in half after Ryosei used flash strike followed by a slide and a vertical slash below the lizard. It lost so much spirit power that even its hardened, dark-green scales were cut like butter.

Despite the killing blow, Ryosei wasn’t finished. He turned around and jumped in between the remains of the lizard while it was still standing and sliced it in another half.

Ryosei finally stopped and examined his hunt. There he saw two clean cuts; one sliced the lizard completely in half while the other was a smaller horizontal slash that cut a translucent orb.

In those last few moments, right before Ryosei slid under the lizard, he summoned Kuro Yaiba and reinforced it. When he was below the lizard, he extended the length of Kuro Yaiba’s blade and reverted it back to normal as he reappeared out the other side. Even if Shin was observing somewhere around town, he wouldn’t see Kuro Yaiba transforming into a longer blade when Ryosei was under the lizard. He took advantage of that small window and cut the lizard cleanly in two.

However, even if the blow looked devastating, Ryosei couldn’t afford to be careless. Shin told him that the core was most likely in the center, but that didn’t mean the lizard still couldn’t move it around. That was why he turned around and landed another blow. The lizard didn’t have any meat inside of it since it was a spirit. This was why it was easy for Ryosei to spot a solid orb in the middle of a translucent body.

Ryosei fulfilled Shin’s task. Seeing as there were no other spirits around, he released his weapon.

“Haahh… That was harder than I thought. Memorizing where its spikes are the whole time really takes it out of you. Well, never mind that. I should have gotten spirit power from that; how do I collect it?”

Almost as if the gods were answering his question, the lizard’s body disappeared and the orb he cut in half turned into small particles and entered Ryosei’s body.

“Hm, so this is what it feels like to gain spirit power… Wait, wasn’t that lizard almost a seer?! Why isn’t my status going up? Wait second, how do I know if my status goes up in the first place?!”

Thinking back to Ryosei’s earlier interrogation with Shin, the closest question Ryosei asked about the current situation, was how to figure out his status. It wasn’t the same as figuring out if he raised his status or not, but it was the best he had.

“I guess I’ll try to manifest on Earth… no, that’s a bad idea. I’m in the middle of a public area someone will definitely freak out if they see me.”

Ryosei figured he should take a rest somewhere. Conveniently enough, he was close to a café by the river and headed over without another word. Although there wasn’t going to be anyone serving, there were seats placed outside for him to rest on.

From atop the trees of the mountainside, Shin was watching Ryosei and his whole battle. He clearly saw the skill Ryosei portrayed. Even with the difference in spirit power, he beat the land dragon. Incredible speed and agility along with clean and decisive strikes. Engaging in battle while using the least amount of spirit power. Shin saw all of it.

“Ka… As expected of my sharp eyes, that spirit’s power is incredible.”

Shin perched himself on one of the trees with his lower half fully regenerated.

“Kekeke, I bet he actually thinks that I have no idea what he is! It is impossible for a newborn to be that knowledgeable! He didn’t even flinch when I talked about statuses. Ah… such power, but such little knowledge. Not to mention… that spirit used mana.”

Shin flew upwards and stared at the disaster before him. The trees and the ground were covered in darkness and scorched in black flame. There were signs of regeneration but were so small that they could barely be noticed.

“Ka! The environment of the Earth-Spirit world is completely dependent on the environment on earth. If anything is different or destroyed, it would regenerate until it is completely identical to earth, otherwise, it would remain the same. Normally, destruction like this will be regenerated in a few hours. But looking at this, it may take months to heal… So, this is the fabled Calamitous Energy. The amalgamation of mana and spirit power… the mark of ruination. Even someone as glorious as I am does not know how it works. It seems to have affected the landscape but not my body.”

Shin placed his hand over his stomach. He remembered the fear he had the moment he realized he was struck with magic. It severed part of his upper body that made contact with magic but it didn’t burn as the landscape did.

“Ka… I guess he is what the old geezers were talking about. To think he truly existed… I thought they were just going crazy from age, kakaka!”

Shin burst out laughing and slowly mellowed down into silence.

“Ka. ‘The one who the light reveals will release this world of its darkness’ …huh? A boy who cannot only use spirit power but as well as magic from the other worlds. He does sound like someone in a prophecy… But despite that, can someone with such destructive power truly save this world? I’ll be the judge of that.”

Shin then flew away, disappearing into the trees.

Meanwhile, at a nearby café, Ryosei pulled a seat out and sat limply, surrendering his whole body to his exhaustion. Although he didn’t feel physical exhaustion, mental exhaustion was plaguing him the same as ever.

“Uuu… It’s been a long day.”

Ryosei learned a few more things about the spirit realm and even experienced a battle with a spirit. The Konjou clan learned general knowledge about the spirit realm, but it doesn’t seem like they know anything about battles between spirits.

“It was a productive day, but I’m still new to this world. I might be able to fend for myself but everything else is still a mystery. Information the clan has on the spirit realm is useful for hunters, but it’s different when it comes to spirits. Why can’t there just be a HUD like in Senkyo’s MMOs to make things easier? Haaa…”

Ryosei slumped further into the chair, stretched his back, and closed his eyes in an attempt to release all the stress he’s been accumulating. When he reopened his eyes, he was greeted with a circle in front of him that had the numbers 12984/13000 in its center.

“Huh? Numbers?”

Ryosei held out his hand to touch it but it completely fazed through. He tried waving his hand on it but nothing worked, when he blinked, the circle disappeared. It left Ryosei confused and wanted to see it again. With the next blink, the circle reappeared, and the next caused it to disappear again.

Seeming to get how the circle worked, Ryosei did some tests. Blinking causes the circle of numbers to appear and disappear. He can control its appearance by simply willing for it, but there was still the matter of what the numbers meant.

“Could it be? Is this how much spirit power I have?”

Wanting to test his theory, Ryosei stood up and held his hand out. From his hand appeared a small pearl. Ryosei was alone, but he didn’t want to take any chances. Upon summoning the circle, he saw that the numbers turned from 12984/13000 to 12974/13000.

“Whoa! It really is my spirit power. Thank the gods! HUD acquired!”

Ryosei jumped joyously in the air with his fist raised high in the sky. It seems that not seeing his current spirit power frustrated him a lot.

“Still though, I only need to obtain 26 more spirit power to rank up. I’m so close! Ah, but I still need extra spirit power to be able to use my abilities and actually maintain revenant status. I’ll just go back to being an eidolon if I use too much. Alright, time to find something to hunt!”

Ryosei didn’t bother releasing Kuro Yaiba and went on to find some spirits. But before he could even move, Ryosei noticed something moving in the river.

“Huh, is that…?”

Something was moving under the water, heading towards the nearby bridge. When it got close, it jumped out of the water and onto the bridge. It was a kappa.

“Yes! One appeared right in front of me. That was easy.”

Ryosei ran over to the kappa but before he could reach it, the kappa turned dark as it walked forward and disappeared. Confused, Ryosei was stopped in his tracks.

“Eh? What did it…?”

The kappa disappeared in a strange way. Its body turned dark from right to left before disappearing, almost as if it was going through a door of some kind.

“Oh, maybe it manifested on earth.”

Ryosei stopped to glimpse. His eyes glowed and turned everything in his vision from the spirit realm to the normal earth he was used to seeing. But what he saw was nowhere near normal. There was a mob of kappas being massacred on the bridge. Ryosei immediately ran to one of the ends of the bridge to see what was happening and saw Yukai hiding behind a man holding a spear.

“What?!”

Ryosei watched as kappa after kappa was pierced and slashed by the person who was skillfully handling his spear.

“That’s… wind magic, isn’t it?”

Ryosei didn’t know what to be more surprised of, the mysterious spear user who he never heard of or Yukai getting herself in another mess. Seeing as the kappas were already retreating, there was no need for Ryosei to come out and ended his glimpse.

“Who was he? Maybe I’ll ask You-chan when I get back. He should know a thing or two.”

Ryosei was about to leave but was brought to a stop as soon as he saw what was coming from down the river. It was a huge deformed kappa and it was coming right towards where Yukai and the spear user were standing at high speed.

He immediately used glimpse in an attempt to warn the two. However, glimpse is an ability that only functioned to see the other world, meaning that Ryosei’s words did not reach them.

“Damn it!”

Ryosei thought about taking out the kappa before it even manifested on earth, but there was still a chance Shin was observing him from afar. He was left with one last option. And it was to manifest on earth as a deformed spirit in front of other people.

He activated visit and took his stance, but realized he couldn’t physically see Kuro Yaiba as it was distorted along with his body, but that didn’t matter. He didn’t need to see his blade in order to fight, after all, he’d been accustomed to his blade since he was a child. He closed his eyes and focused on the kappa heading for Yukai and her friend.

Ryosei sensed the kappa coming closer and closer. With that in mind and the speed it was going, he calculated its arrival to the very second. Right as the huge kappa manifested, without mercy, Ryosei intercepted it with his blade.

He quickly turned around to see that he cut the kappa’s core right in its center, just before it was blown away by the spear user. Ryosei looked around their surroundings to be sure that there were no more threats. Once he was sure, he released his weapon and blinked his eyes to summon the circle for his spirit power, and saw the numbers still appeared 12974/13000. Last time, he simply had to wait until he absorbed the core, but maybe it was different now that he was going to reach a higher status.

“Maybe I have to absorb it forcibly.”

Ryosei pulled up his arm and pointed it at the core over the distance. To his surprise, the core didn’t disperse into particles. But instead, it became a flame and zoomed straight toward him.

“Wait, what?!”

Upon contact, Ryosei was covered in flame and he could see the numbers on the circle rising. From 12974/13000 it became 13674/25000. Ryosei felt the heat of the flame enveloping him and transferring its heat to him. It was warm, and it didn’t hurt him. He watched his arms turn from a dark figure to his normal human arms.

“What the hell was that? I was inside fire but it didn’t hurt one bit. Ah, maybe this is what happens when I get a higher status? Maybe… hey, you, can you see me now?”

Ryosei called out to the spear user in front of him. But before he could even respond, the person behind him answers his question for him.

“Ryosei-onii-san?!”

“Oh… You can see me!”

“Wait, Yutei-san! It’s dangerous!”

Yukai bolted out of Ren’s protection and headed straight for Ryosei. Ren tried to stop her but she was too quick.

“Hey, Yukai-chan.”

“It is you, Ryosei-onii—Eh?”

Yukai tried to touch Ryosei but her hands fazed right through his body. Confused, Yukai tried touching Ryosei everywhere but with no luck. Ryosei stepped back to get some distance between them.

“U-Umm, Yukai-chan, what are you doing?”

“R-Ryosei-onii-san! What’s happening to you?! Why can’t I touch you?!”

“What do you mean? I’m a spirit, remember? There’s no way you can touch me.”

“A-Ah, oh yeah. Sorry, I must’ve bothered you.”

“Not at all. This is the first time you’ve seen me in this form so it’s only natural. The last time you saw me like this was in the dream world where both of us had a spiritual body, but it’s a bit different here in the real world.”

Ryosei and Yukai were having their idle chat but the situation still didn’t sit right with Ren. She wedged herself in between Yukai and Ryosei with her spear still at the ready.

“Sorry for disturbing you two, but I’m not backing down until I understand what’s going on.”

“There’s no need to worry, Akira-san. This is Konjou Ryosei-onii-san. He saved my life multiple times.”

“Konjou…? So you’re a spirit of the local hunters. Why are you here?”

“I saw you two so I came to help.”

“Really now? How exactly did you meet Yutei-san?”

“I met her before I died. Is there something wrong about that?”

“Yes, there is.”

Ren pointed her spear at Ryosei, her eyes seething with distrust.

“That can’t be possible. All spirited souls lose their memories, no exceptions. What do you have to say about that?”

“…”

Ryosei made a mistake. The person he was talking to was not affiliated with the clan. He was a stranger that also knew about the supernatural. It was possible he was a member of another group. It would be bad if he discovered that Ryosei was some kind of unique spirit.

“W-Well that’s because…”

Ryosei racked his brain while trying to look as normal as possible. His eyes strayed away from Ren and landed on Yukai.

“…of her. Yukai-chan told me about my past and how we met.”

Yukai looked a bit confused but quickly picked up on Ryosei’s intentions when she saw the desperate look in his eyes.

“Ah, y-yeah! It’s true! Ryosei-onii-san saved me from a car accident. But because of that…”

Yukai trailed off, looking a bit uneasy. It was obvious to Ryosei that the accident still bothered her.

“It’s a sensitive topic, so can I ask you to refrain from asking her? I’m not a threat so there’s no need to worry.”

Ren still didn’t seem convinced. But she didn’t look as aggressive as before. She seemed to be concerned about Yukai as well.

“I’ll just take my leave. I’ll see you some other time—”

Just as Ryosei was about to leave, Yukai called out to him.

“W-Wait, Ryosei-onii-san!”

Both Ryosei and Ren turned to Yukai.

“I-I want to talk about something, so… Could you come with us? It’s okay, Akira-san. We can trust him, I assure you.”

Yukai stared at Ren with pleading eyes. Although it seemed to trouble her, she reluctantly lowered her spear and stored it back in her bag.

“Alright, fine. But if I see you do something suspicious, I won’t hesitate to cut you down.”

“Y-Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.”

On their way home, Ren was the first to separate from them. Yukai insisted that she accompanied her all the way home, but Ren quickly denied it and ran before Yukai could say anything else.

“Aw, I couldn’t fully make it up to Akira-san.”

Yukai stared at the ground depressingly. It was a huge difference from her earlier cheerfulness. It was like night and day. One second she was cheerful and sad the next. Ryosei could not stand it.

“Why are you so obsessed about repaying her? You just mistook her for a guy, right? I did too, you know. If you hadn’t talked about it earlier, I definitely wouldn’t have noticed.”

Yukai stayed quiet and lowered her head. That was not how she usually acted. She would have answered Ryosei the second he asked. He tried to peek under her face and look her in the eyes but she averted them.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, then that’s fine too. Everyone has their own circumstances, after all. That’s what I would normally say. But… this is my fault, isn’t it?”

“You’re—”

Yukai turned her face to Ryosei inadvertently and tried to deny his claim but seeing Ryosei’s serious look, she swallowed her words.

“Hahh… Looks like saving people has its own consequences.”

Ryosei saved Yukai when she was little and died for it. He made an act of kindness to Yukai and denied her every way of repaying him. For a child, seeing someone die in front of them must have been traumatizing. That was what likely lead her to what she is now. Unable to go on without repaying her debts.

“When you learned that I lived in Senkyo’s body, you immediately offered to help us without even knowing the dangers. You wanted to repay me without any thought of your own health. That’s what you thought, am I wrong? Isn’t that also part of the reason you were so happy to see me earlier?”

“I-I… don’t…”

Yukai struggled to speak her mind against Ryosei’s claims.

“Seriously…”

Yukai was like an open book. She didn’t even try to deny the truth. She couldn’t get herself to lie to defend herself, not to the person she wants to repay. Ryosei felt like he was bullying a defenseless little critter.

“I-I’m sorry. I’m just a bother to have around, aren’t I?”

“…If you keep throwing yourself into danger… Then, yes.”

Yukai stopped moving the moment she heard his response.

“…!! Yeah… E… Exactly what I thought… I… I’m just…”

Her voice was shaking and her eyes began to moisten. She tried to keep herself from crying but tears penetrated her defenses the moment she blinked.

“E-Excuse me!”

“Ah, wait!”

Yukai ran off as fast as she could and left Ryosei behind. She disappeared from Ryosei’s sight, swallowed by the darkness of the streets. She was now alone with no one around and made a beeline for her apartment.

*“\*Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! I’m such an idiot! I only wanted to help but all I ended up doing is causing trouble for everyone. I didn’t even think of Ryosei-nii-san’s feelings. All I did was think for my satisfaction! I’m such a terrible person.\*”*

Yukai berated herself as she ran away. She hated herself. Even though deep in her heart she knew exactly what she was doing and what it was causing, she still continued to try and butt in.

The tears came pouring down her eyes, cries filling the dark, empty streets. She arrived at a quiet, two-story apartment. She climbed the stairs and stopped in front of room 203. Hurriedly, she took out a key in her bag and unlocked the door. The inside was dark and noiseless which meant no other person was home.

Yukai quickly entered the room, turned on the lights, and closed the door behind her with her back as she threw all her body weight at it. Losing strength in her legs, she slowly slid down against the door onto her behind. She covered her face with her shoulders and cried as loud as she could. All the while repeating “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

She stayed there crying, bawling her eyes out. She was alone in her small apartment room with no one to comfort her.

“Don’t be sorry. I should be the one to say that.”

A lone voice called out to Yukai. But that shouldn’t have been possible. She was alone when she arrived. She gingerly looked up revealing her disheveled face and saw Ryosei kneeling down in front of her. He tried to touch her face and give her warmth, but he was unable to do so and his hand just fazed through.

“I’m sorry. I should have been clearer. I just want to keep you safe but I ended up making you cry, I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize!”

Ryosei apologized wholeheartedly but Yukai cut him off before he could finish and reburied her face in her arms. He was taken aback. The usual Yukai wouldn’t cut anyone off and shout like that.

“\**H-Hic\**… Don’t… I’m a terrible person… \**hic\**. A really, really terrible person. \**hic*\* A-About what I wanted to talk about…\**hic*\* Before I even met you with Yukou-san, I was already under a lot of stress… \**hic, sniffle*.\*”

Yukai sucked her tears up and tried her best to explain to Ryosei her situation.

“My mother is in a coma. She has been for a while now. The doctors said that nothing was wrong with her. They couldn’t figure out the cause of her coma. All they could do was put her in the ICU and stabilize her health. Right now, she’s still in the hospital suffering on her own. The only thing I could do was sit and watch her. I didn’t want that. It hurt every time I entered the room with her unconscious. I began to think of the worst. Eventually, I stopped visiting her. I came up with excuses for myself. That I needed to focus on school. That I needed a part-time job. But in reality, that was all a front. I… I was scared. I don’t want her to die. I wanted to be there for her. But when I tried to go to visit her, my legs would plant themselves on the ground, and my mind would come up with excuses not to go… That’s when I met you again. You saved my life again. I told myself that I should repay you. That maybe if I used my time on repaying you, I could keep my mind from my mother… I’m horrible, aren’t I? Some daughter I turned out to be. I ran away from her and left her alone, just to keep myself from hurting. I even troubled you, just to keep myself from hurting. And now… I’m troubling you again with my own problems… \**hic\*.* I’m the worst! \**Hic\*…*”

Yukai continued to cry. Ryosei listened carefully to her. She hated herself for being self-centered to protect herself. She didn’t want to get hurt, and she hated herself for that. She thought she was the worst human being alive because she troubled everyone for her own sake. After collecting his thoughts, he responded to her.

“Yeah, what you did was absolutely terrible.”

“…!!”

It only served to worsen the situation. But then…

“But… I think that’s normal. We humans don’t want to be hurt. None of us do. We act selfishly to get rid of that pain. That’s why you did what you did. Everyone has those times. The only difference is that there are some who keep running away, and others who face their pain. Even I acted selfishly and troubled everyone. I ran away as you did.”

“\**Sniffle\**… You did?”

Yukai calmed herself down a little. She wanted to hear what Ryosei had to say.

“Yeah, I did. It was after my parents’ death. They died at the same time from illness. I couldn’t take it. The reality was too hard to swallow. I left my clan and worried my close friends. Then, when I died, my cousins grieved my death so much that they blamed themselves. I was pathetic too, you know. I didn’t know how badly I messed up until I met my cousin in Senkyo’s body… If only I faced that pain, then I wouldn’t have made everyone suffer so much. I hated myself too. Even before I died, I already knew what I was doing was wrong. I just didn’t have the courage to face it.”

Ryosei understood. He understood all too well. The pain, the denial, and the regret that came with it. It was the worst choice he could have possibly done. He knew that but chose to do it either way. It wasn’t something that logical reasoning and self-control could stop.

“Liar.”

Yukai bluntly said.

“Eh?”

“Liar.”

She repeated.

“W-Wait, which part of my story do you think I’m lying about?”

Ryosei panicked. Clearly, he didn’t expect such a response from her.

“Everything. You’re lying about everything! If you aren’t, then how, how did you manage to forgive yourself?!”

Yukai jumped up and kneeled with her face right up to Ryosei’s face. She wanted to hear his answer. A bit perplexed, he tried to distance himself from her, but she didn’t let him and closed the distance. Seeing as his effort was useless, he proceeded to tell her.

“I didn’t forgive myself.”

“Th-Then…!”

Yukai tried to interrupt, but Ryosei silenced her and continued talking.

“But everyone else has forgiven me. Listen to me, Yukai-chan. I won’t be able to forgive myself. I plan to carry this burden until the very end. That way, there’s no way that I’d forget exactly how painful my experience was. That way, the next time it happens, I’ll be sure to make the right choice. How about you? What do you want to do? Do you want to keep running away, or do you want to face the pain and carry your burden?”

“I-I…”

Yukai still seemed to be indecisive. Ryosei knew exactly what was holding her back. It was the same thing that kept him from facing the pain in the past. The arduous chains of fear.

“Don’t be afraid. The path ahead is thorny, but you won’t be alone. As someone who went through it by themselves, I wouldn’t want you to have the same experience. That’s why I’ll accompany you. I’ll walk with you in the dark streets, just like earlier. So don’t be afraid. I’ll be by your side. I promise.”

Ryosei stretched his hand out to Yukai.

“But in exchange, you have to make an effort to change. If you ever get tired, I’ll be here for you, alright?”

Her gaze was locked onto his hand like it was her salvation. However, she removed her eyes from it and stared at Ryosei’s warm, compassionate look. It reminded her of how her mother used to stare at her like that. Accepting and forgiving. Overflowing with emotion, Yukai jumped into Ryosei and embraced him.

“Owowow… W-Wait, Yukai-chan. I-It hurts…”

She seized Ryosei with her ironclad grasp. So much so that Ryosei began hurting. He was too focused to realize, but once he did, he was flabbergasted.

*\*It hurts?! Wait a second, I’m a* spirit, *aren’t I? How is she able to touch me?\**

Ryosei looked down on the weeping Yukai. She cried on his chest, dampening his clothes in the process. When he saw this sight, he put away everything else in the back of his head and decided to comfort her. He gently pet her head with one hand and wrapped her back with the other. He enveloped her in his soothing warmth and stayed like that for a while longer.

**Chapter 2: Mutuality**

*“\*I see… Well, just like what I said before, just take your time. You’re forcing yourself too much.\*”*

Senkyo let out a long sigh before responding to Ryosei. It was the next day. They each had their respective adventures and Ryosei’s return to his body caused these to merge, making the other known of their activities, almost as if making a report. Ryosei had ventured into the spirit realm, while Senkyo finished his talk with Freda and was introduced to his new mentor. However, Senkyo’s talk seemed to be plaguing him which resulted in this conversation with Ryosei.

“It’s just pathetic. After all I’ve been through, I never thought something like this would actually trouble me.”

*“\*Doesn’t that just prove that you are human?\*”*

“Haha… I wonder…”

Senkyo grabbed a cup of tea and sat tiredly on the sofa. He was trying to collect his mind after a stressful day. The main source of his stress was his talk with Freda. Whatever they talked about, it was troubling him greatly, but it seemed like Ryosei saw this coming. Tired of being suffocated by the atmosphere, Senkyo wanted to change it so he switched topics.

“Well, enough about me. You seemed to have quite the eventful day yourself. Especially with Yutei-san.”

*“\*Something like that couldn’t be avoided. I just wanted to help her out.\*”*

“I’m not trying to make fun of you. If anything, I think you did great. But still, we can’t ignore the fact you were able to make contact with each other. We tested it earlier, no one else can touch you, not even me.”

Senkyo and Ryosei performed a test earlier. Ryosei manifested on earth and tried to touch other people passing by, and even tried it with Senkyo, but in the end, he was not able to make contact with a single one.

“I can help you out by theorizing, but testing will completely rely on you.”

*“\*I know. I’ll try to figure out how this is happening tomorrow.\*”*

**…………**

*“\*Even though I said that, I don’t really know how to start…\*”*

Ryosei looked over to Yukai using his spirit vision. Outlines of the students and the classroom filled his vision.

*“\*Huh?\*”*

But for some reason. Within the backdrop of traced outlines, the girl who sat beside him was the only one filled with color and depth. He saw Yukai as how a normal person would perceive her. This was the first time he saw anyone like this. It took him a few seconds to return to his senses. When he did, he knew he had no time to waste. Since going out of Senkyo’s body would mean showing the whole class a floating flame, Ryosei had to go to the spirit realm to be able to do anything.

*“\*Hey, Senkyo. Open up the spirit world.\*”*

Without removing his eyes from the lecture, Senkyo reached under his desk and drew a circle. Upon completion, it then reflected the spirit world, showing a radiant turquoise hue on the desk. He hovered his hand over the circle and a blue flame appeared from his palm and placed itself on the colored part of the desk.

*“\*Are you still here?\*”*

Senkyo thought to himself, but there was no response. It meant that Ryosei was already out of his body. After confirming that, he took his hand out of the circle. A second later, a light enveloped the blue flame that was Ryosei and disappeared.

*“\*Good luck out there.\*”*

Although he knew Ryosei wasn’t able to hear him, he bid goodbye as his spirit friend was transported to the spirit realm.

“Alright! It worked!”

Ryosei was in the spirit realm. He tried to move, but he was stuck in something. When he looked below him, his body was inside Senko’s desk. Nothing was hurting, but there was no doubt that his stomach was going through the desk.

“What the hell?”

He pulled up his fist and strengthened it with spirit power before destroying the desk below him. His whole body got stuck in the desk, causing him to destroy all of it to get out.

“W-Wow, transporting to the spirit realm is more dangerous than I thought. I better be careful where I transfer the next time I come here. Anyway…”

Ryosei moved on and shifted his focus to Yukai’s seat. There was something unusual hovering above it. It was a red flame that looked similar to Ryosei’s blue flame whenever he left Senkyo’s body. He looked around for something that could help him understand what it was, but there was nothing there. The classroom was empty except for the flame in front of him.

“Is this supposed to be… Yukai-chan?”

Ryosei observed it for a bit. However, there was nothing else around it. It was just a flame. Seeing as he was getting nowhere, he decided to touch it. But when he did, his hand fazed straight through it. It didn’t hurt. It was like nothing was there at all.

Ryosei closed his eyes and used his spirit vision. An outline of the deserted classroom appeared, but in place of the red flame was Yukai’s figure. It was like she was physically in front of him, coloring his empty vision.

He tried to touch her while using his spirit vision but ended unsuccessfully. His hand did not make contact with her at all and fazed through her body. Ryosei pondered what to do for a while. There was only so much he could do in the spirit realm. He needed to meet with Yukai on Earth, but that meant manifesting. Right now, she was in the middle of class. It was not something that he could do at the current moment.

Having nothing else to do, Ryosei exited the classroom to look for clues on how this was happening. It was possible that something in the spirit realm was causing her to always appear in his vision.

The whole time he was roaming the halls of the school, the red flame was always in his vision. Even when he was all the way out on the fields, he saw Yukai’s flame through the walls and other objects that obstructed his vision of it. The only thing that constantly changed was the flame’s size. He was able to tell the depth of the flame, allowing him to calculate his distance with it. Ryosei explored the whole school and even the locations around it, but he could not find a single thing that would explain the situation.

“Hahh… I’m stumped.”

After a long time walking around, Ryosei took a break on top of the rooftop. He was sitting on the floor with his back resting against the fence.

“I guess this means that nothing is externally influencing her, but I can’t be too sure, not yet. Hahh… If only I could talk with her right now then, maybe I could finally get somewhere.”

Ryosei’s eyes naturally gravitated towards the red flame below him, trying to stare it down for answers. But unlike before, the flame was moving around.

“Hm? I guess this means it’s lunch break. Wow, I spent a long time searching and I didn’t even notice the time go by.”

Ryosei’s eyes were still following Yukai’s flame.

“Hm?”

But for some reason, the flame was gradually getting larger.

“Is she…”

The flame was getting closer and closer until it was right behind the rooftop’s door in front of him.

“…coming to me?”

The door to the rooftop opened. Just to be sure, Ryosei used glimpse to make sure who it was. And as he thought, it was Yukai. When she closed the door, she stared at Ryosei, looking at him straight in the eye, almost as if she, a human on Earth, saw him, a spirit in the spirit realm.

“…”

It could’ve been a coincidence. Ryosei didn’t want to jump to conclusions so he moved to the corner over his left. But through his glimpse, he could see Yukai’s eyes following him around.

“…”

When Ryosei reached the corner, he used flash strike to immediately move to the farthest corner. It was the corner behind Yukai’s left side, her blind spot. The flame stopped for a few seconds, but then, it moved closer to Ryosei. In his glimpse, Yukai was peeking around the entrance’s bulkhead corner while looking straight at him. There was no possible way such a thing was a coincidence. Having nothing else to do, Ryosei manifested himself on Earth. Various colors entered his eyes, he saw the clear blue sky above him, the town over in the distance, and Yukai who was elated to see him.

“Ryosei-nii-san!”

Yukai made a beeline for Ryosei and greeted him with a quick hug. To his surprise, she was able to touch him.

“Y-Yukai-chan? What are you doing here? No, how did you even find me?”

“What are you saying? Weren’t you the one who called me here?”

“Huh? I’m pretty sure I didn’t do anything.”

“Well, you see…”

Yukai explained why she ended up there. She went on to eat lunch when class ended, just like how she usually does, entertaining herself by making plans for later in the day. Apparently, she had trouble deciding about what to do after school, but when she finally did, she felt the urge to look above her, and there she found a small blue flame coming out of the ceiling.

She panicked and pointed out the flame to the cafeteria staff, but they saw nothing. They thought she was crazy and sent her away. She was a bit worried and kept eying the flame, but when she noticed it was following her throughout the building like the moon in a clear night sky, she knew something was wrong. No one else could see it except her. She began thinking, and the only idea that came to mind was Ryosei. Because of that, she followed the flame and got closer to it until it led her to the rooftop.

“A blue flame, huh?”

Now that Ryosei was manifested on earth, he could no longer see the red flame.

“Can you still see it now?”

Yukai took a step back and examined Ryosei. She also looked around her surroundings.

“No, it’s gone now. I think it disappeared when you appeared. Does that mean it was you?”

“Perhaps, but I’m still not sure…”

“I see. Then… no, never mind.”

Her eyes strayed away from Ryosei as she was processing her thought, but she stopped herself. He had a good guess why. She must have thought of offering her help, but recalling their talk yesterday night, she was making good of her word and restrained herself, thinking that she would only trouble him. A smile appeared on his face, seeing that Yukai was trying to change. However, he could not dissolve the phenomenon around him and Yukai, he thought doing this was counterproductive, but he had to obtain whatever information existed for him to act on it properly.

“Your class is about to begin, right?”

“Yes, in just a few more minutes.”

“Then, can you help me out later? I want to know what that flame was all about.”

Yukai’s face lit up the moment Ryosei asked for her help. But then, it gradually faded. That gesture struck Ryosei as strange.

“Yeah, I’d like to help you. I really do! But… I have a part-time job. I don’t want to make you wait.”

“Is that so? Well, I don’t mind if it gets late as long as you don’t.”

“Really!?”

Ryosei nodded his head as a response. Yukai gave Ryosei another tight hug.

“Thank you!!”

A few seconds later, Ryosei felt her hug getting tighter, strangely, not with excitement, but instead with slight distress. He didn’t ask what was wrong and waited for her to open up by herself. After gathering the courage to do so, Yukai opened her mouth.

“Actually, about what I decided to do earlier, before seeing that blue flame… I wanted to ask you to come with me… so I can take the first step to make everything right. Is that too much?”

“I already told you yesterday, right? I’m not one to break my promises, well, not anymore.”

Yukai showed her appreciation by hugging Ryosei even tighter, constricting him to the level that it slightly hurt him, but he toughed it out to not break the mood.

“Thank you so much. I mean it.”

Ryosei didn’t respond. Instead, he comforted her by hugging her back. After being satisfied, Yukai finally let go.

“Then, I’ll see you later, Ryosei-nii-san. I have to get to class.”

“Sure, do your best. I’ll be waiting here for you later, okay?”

Yukai nodded happily and exited the rooftop, her light footsteps dampening as time passed by the second. After confirming that she left, Ryosei returned to the spirit realm.

“Hm… She can still touch me.”

Ryosei watched as a red flame moved around below him. He used his spirit vision and saw Yukai’s figure through the outlines walking down the stairs.

“So, we can see each other through these flames? She said she saw a blue flame after making her decision… Either that means she didn’t notice my flame before that or she only saw my flame when she began thinking about me. All of this began yesterday. I must’ve done something… No, we must’ve done something. But what could it be?”

Ryosei slumped on the ground.

“Whatever it is, there’s clearly some kind of connection between us. Well, I can’t figure anything out without her. For now, I’ll just stay here. I don’t want trouble with other spirits.”

Later that afternoon, Yukai returned to meet up with Ryosei. He was about to manifest, but he realized that he would have to walk through the school of students if he did that. They quickly relocated to a secluded area outside the school. When they met up, she immediately took a grip on Ryosei’s hand. Her grip was tight. It was obvious she was looking for someone to comfort her. In return, he gripped her hand back while they headed to their destination. The hospital.

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

Ryosei and Yukai stood at the entrance of the hospital. He was rather concerned for Yukai. She spent over five minutes standing in silence, trying to gather her courage to enter. She did not respond, but not because she intentionally ignored him, it seemed like she didn’t even notice him speak.

Instead of calling out for her, Ryosei tightened her grip on Yukai’s hand. Actions speak louder than words, he tested this phrase and it was only then that he caught her attention. She was a bit startled and stared at him in surprise. He comforted her with a bright smile and said to her “It’s okay. I’m here.”

Yukai took a deep breath. She did not speak, but she walked forward. After dealing with the receptionist, they finally reached the door to a certain room. The patient in the room was Yutei Yuriko.

She reached to open the door by placing her hand on the handle. And finally, after one last push, she opened the door to the room. Ryosei let out a light gasp but silenced himself before Yukai noticed. There, she saw her mother unconscious on the bed. She had light brown hair, her bright pupils concealed by her eyelids. Her body had thinned out due to the tolls of time without proper nutrition. It was an indication of how long she’s been here.

Yukai paused for a second but walked into the room after another deep breath. They stood by the bedside and took a moment to take everything in.

“H-Hello, mom. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

Yukai stopped speaking. She was hoping to get a response, but deep inside, she knew that was impossible.

“It’s been about half a year now since my last visit… How have you been doing?”

Ryosei stood beside her quietly gripping her hand. He felt the constant pressure from her grasp. Her arm was shaking, but she didn’t let it show on her face.

“I’ve been doing well in my studies. I even got a part-time job. I didn’t want to rely on Dad’s money any longer. I know you don’t want me to do that, but I needed something to take my mind off everything. Nothing much changed in half a year. I’m sorry I’m not much of a conversation. You’d think I would have a lot of stories to tell if I was gone for that long… I’m sorry about that.”

A tear dropped from her eye. More came coming down right after. She kept a straight face saying that she was fine and was holding her own, but her teary eyes and trembling voice betrayed her.

“You must’ve been lonely by yourself. I… I’m sorry about that. I was too much of a coward. I ran away… I’m sorry about that. I left you alone just to save myself… I’m sorry about that. I know you went through a lot of trouble…*\*hic\** Y-You must be furious. I left you after all. I’m sorry about that.”

It was then that she finally reached her limit. She could not contain her emotions and her face was disheveled. Her composure broke like a dam, the heavy waves of emotions overpowering her and sending her hands and forehead to the floor, the rest of her body curled up, lowering herself for forgiveness.

“*\*hic\** I’m sorry for everything! *\*hic\** I-I’m the worst daughter, aren’t I!? *\*hic\** I couldn’t be there when you needed me! *\*hic\** I just ran away *\*hic\** even though I knew what I was doing was wrong. *\*hic\** I let myself stay that way *\*hic\** because it hurt me seeing you like this! *\*hic\** I *\*hic\** I’m sorry!! *\*hic\** I’m really sorry!! *\*hic\** I swear *\*hic\**  I’ll make it up to you *\*hic\** I’ll be better *\*hic\** so please *\*hic\** please forgive me…!!”

Yukai began to bawl her eyes out and repeatedly apologized. Even Ryosei didn’t know what to do. He was taken aback the moment she groveled on the floor. At first, he thought of getting her off the ground, but when he tried to carry her up, she struggled out of his grip and ended up burying her face by the side of her mother’s bed. Ryosei thought this was better than having her face on the ground so he decided to let her be. After a while, Yukai finally calmed down. She stayed in the room, introducing Ryosei to her mother and telling stories until it was about time for her part-time job. Just before they left, Ryosei gave one last message to Yukai’s mother.

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Yutei. As Yukai-chan said so earlier, I am Konjou Ryosei. Before we go, I’d like to ask you to forgive her. She’s been struggling by herself just like you were. Today, she finally found the courage to come here and face her troubles. She never forgot about you in the past 6 months. She came in earnest and overcame herself. I would like you to find it in your heart to forgive her if her actions ever troubled you. Thank you very much. I will be sure to take care of your daughter in your absence.”

Ryosei bowed to Yukai’s mother before proceeding to leave the room.

“Ryosei-nii-san…”

Yukai heard everything he said while she was waiting by the door. She stared at him in surprise. As a response, he showed her another comforting smile before urging her to move forward.

“Come on. You’re going to be late for your part-time.”

“O-Oh, yeah.”

Yukai closed the door and walked beside Ryosei. She was about to grab his hand, but she stopped midway. She hesitated and rethought her actions. She put her hand down and walked beside him normally.

“Then, I’ll be seeing you later, Ryosei-nii-san.”

“Yeah, I’ll be waiting around the area. Do your best in there.”

“Sure!”

Ryosei saw Yukai off as she entered the back entrance of a building. He walked to the front and examined the place. It was a café called “Savor Soul.” Apparently, she got a part-time job here six months ago.

He walked up to the store and peeked through the glass window. Most of the seats were occupied. It had a relaxing atmosphere with the customers enjoying themselves talking with their friends, family, and colleagues while eating their food.

Ryosei spotted Yukai come out of the back wearing the café’s uniform. She wore a white long sleeve with a grey waist apron and black pants. He was a bit surprised at how good she looked in that outfit. She went up to the person brewing coffee and bowed to her a few times before standing in front of the counter.

“So, she’s a cashier here.”

He stayed still observing her interactions with customers. She seemed to be used to talking to the customers and took their orders smoothly without stuttering or messing up. Ryosei remembered the time she asked for Senkyo’s help bringing the class’ notebooks to the faculty. She was a nervous wreck and stuttering at almost every word, but now she was completely composed, devoid of her usual clumsy self.

After a while, Ryosei decided to walk inside as a customer. Why not watch her closer, he thought. As he was about to push the door open, he was suddenly pulled from behind.

“Whoa!?”

He saw the doors of the café become smaller until it was perfectly framed inside a thin circle floating in the sky. Everything outside of the circle shifted from earth to the spirit realm, colored in its usual turquoise hue. When he realized what was happening, Ryosei summoned his weapon, but before he could move, a transparent barrier surrounded him. It was the work of a spirit. Ryosei could not move to swing his blade. He had to protect his core at all costs. He was about to turn to a drastic move but he stopped when a man’s voice called out to him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Ryosei turned to the voice behind him and saw a huge man in a military uniform. He had his arm bent away from him with his elbow pointing at him. Instead of a weapon, he was using his arm to threaten him.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you think no one would notice a spirit loitering in front of the café? If you don’t state your intentions right now, I’ll cut your head off and destroy your core.”

“Huh?”

Ryosei was a bit confused. At first, he thought that a spirit pulled him back into the spirit world to take his core, but that did not seem to be the case. He did not know exactly how the spirit was able to forcefully pull him into the spirit realm, but there was no other explanation. But the most mind-boggling part of this situation was that he wasn’t being attacked. Sure, he was being threatened. But the soldier spirit in front of him seemed to care more about why he was standing around the café.

“I don’t have time for games. You have 10 seconds! 10. 9—”

“I was just going to enter like a customer.”

“Really now? Do you even know how to act like a human? If you didn’t, you would’ve just walked right through those doors and freaked out the customers.”

“Ah…”

The realization just hit him. Ryosei was so used to making contact with Yukai that he forgot he couldn’t make contact with objects.

“By the looks of it, you forgot about that fact. I don’t care how much you like it there on the living world, but if you can’t even keep the basics like that, you’re better off staying here.”

“Y-Yeah… wait. Why are you even so concerned about this café?”

“Hm?”

The soldier was surprised to hear that question. He was looking at Ryosei with a disappointed face.

“You have at least a revenant status, but you don’t know about this café? Just how did you manage to survive out there without hearing about this place?”

He was talking like it was common knowledge in the spirit realm.

“You don’t seem to be lying about not knowing. Normally, I would let you go. But I can’t take any chances. You’re clearly a fighter.”

Ryosei traced the soldier’s glare and saw it was being directed to his sword. Getting his message, he released it to reassure him of their safety. The soldier nodded his head.

“Okay. Cinnamon.”

The barrier around Ryosei began to distort. It shrunk around him in a way that he could not escape even as the barrier was transforming, but also transform into a tight collar around his neck.

“If you try anything, your head will be cut off and you’ll disappear where you stand.”

Ryosei was about to touch his collar, but he was struck by a sharp pain throughout his body.

“Ow!”

“Keep your hands to yourself. Now, Kris!”

The doors behind Ryosei flew open and appeared another spirited soul. He was a young boy in his teens with orange hair and blue eyes. He wore the same café uniform Yukai was wearing.

“Yes, General—OW!!”

The soldier smacked the boy as he arrived.

“I told you to call me ‘Manager!’”

“E-Ehhh?? You really want to stick with something that lame? General is waaay cooler! Besides, the boss told me it was fine!”

The soldier breathed a heavy sigh before resigning himself to his fate.

“Fine, I don’t care anymore. Here, I’ve got an intruder for you. Send him to the interrogation room and watch him until we get there.”

“You got it!”

Following the soldier’s command, the boy took Ryosei and escorted him with a bat pointed to his core. He led him to the building nearby where many spirited souls were guarding the vicinity. The boy escorting him greeted the other spirits as they walked by, and so did they. They stopped at a room with only a table and two chairs. The boy placed him on the farthest chair from the door and kept the bat on his core.

**…………**

“…”

“…So, what are you doing here?”

It’s been a few hours since he was brought to the room. Ryosei and the boy waited there in silence the whole time. But now, it seems that not even the boy who was guarding him was able to bear the boredom.

“…”

But Ryosei didn’t respond.

“Come on, you can tell me!”

“…”

“Aren’t you being a little cold? At least say something!”

“…”

He breathed a heavy sigh and was about to give up. But right as he did, Ryosei finally spoke.

“What’s with that café?”

“!? Ha-ha! I’m glad you asked!”

The boy’s face brightened when he finally acquired a conversation. Ryosei waited for him to become desperate before saying anything.

“Savor Soul is the best café on earth and the spirit realm! We serve all kinds of customers with respect and a big menu to choose from! The café that will soothe your soul and make you feel alive again, that’s Savor Soul!”

“U-Uhuh…”

Ryosei wanted to get information but he mostly got a huge sales pitch. The boy did say something of interest. “The best café on earth and the spirit realm.”

“So, are you telling me that this café serves spirits too?”

“Of course! There’s nothing else like it! It serves true spirits and spirited souls alike with food from earth as offerings to increase spirit power along with that delicious taste! Most of its customers are nice but when something happens, we always have the general. He’s the strongest spirit I know! He’s the coolest!”

“A business in the spirit realm? I understand that customers will get spirit power, but what do you get in exchange?”

“Oh, you didn’t even know that? Wow, you must be really new. It’s this world’s currency. Dark Cores.”

“And where do you get those?”

“Dark cores are cores of fully rampaging spirits and predators. Here, as your senior, I’ll be nice and give you a whole lecture on the spirit realm—”

“No, please don’t do that. Just tell me what predators are.”

Ryosei shut the boy down. He didn’t want another long talk about information he already knew. The boy showed a discontented face.

“Ugh, fine. If you already knew what rampaging spirits are, then predators are spirits that are born in that state. They don’t have emotions and are only born to kill. They are true spirits, but not even the other true spirits like them. They’re basically enemies of every normal spirit in the realm. No one likes them which is why we use their cores as currency. It helps clean this part of the spirit realm. We call them currency, but in the end, they’re still cores. You can absorb them to gain spirit power if you want.”

“Wait, how do you even take cores away without them regenerating?”

“Oh, that? You have to have a Spirit status to do that. You can use your own spirit power to contain the core like a bag so that it doesn’t regenerate. Fortunately for us, these things operate completely by instinct. If it thinks that it can’t get out, it will give up and stop resisting.”

“I see. So you need to fight it until it calms down. Isn’t that a bit too much work just to contain something though?”

“Probably, if you do it by yourself. But if you have another person with you, then it’s really easy. We just have one of them become a bait and gather a large group of those things, then the other will cage those things in a huge barrier.”

“Then that means you have to be stronger than them, right?”

“Yeah, you’re not wrong. But with what the spirit realm turned into now, I don’t think newcomers like you will have a hard time surviving. Our café even offers to help new spirits if they work for it.”

The boy seemed like he was thinking back to a past memory. His face turned from an energetic to a gentle one. It was only for a second. He then returned to his usual energetic self and continued the conversation.

“Yep, this world changed and it was all the boss’s doing! She’s like the mafia boss of the earth spirit world! Don Kait—OWW!!”

A small ball suddenly hit the boy’s head and screamed in pain. Ryosei turned to the source of the ball and saw a familiar face. It was a girl with reddish-brown hair and brown eyes. She wore the same uniform as the boy behind Ryosei. It was the same person that Yukai first talked to when he was looking through the window.

“I told you not to call me that!”

The girl entered the room with the soldier from earlier following her from behind. She scowled at him as she took her seat in front of Ryosei.

“I-I’m sorry, Boss!”

“I told you Miss Kaitlyn is fine… whatever. So, this is the suspicious spirit you were talking about?”

The person that seemed to be named Kaitlyn turned to the soldier behind her.

“Yes. He was about to enter the café without knowing how to act like a human. Luckily, there was no one around to see him so I took him into custody.”

“I see. Thanks for that. Now…”

Kaitlyn returned her gaze to Ryosei. She threw suspecting looks at him and examined his person.

“My friend here filled me in about you. Normally we wouldn’t keep you like this if you are only new here, but the fact that you’re at least a revenant status without knowing how this world functions is highly suspicious. Spirits can survive by themselves but never this quick. Not to mention, they’d have grasped this world’s common sense before revenant status. This isn’t the first time we’ve had spirits pretend to be newcomers here after all.”

“I’m not looking for trouble. It is true that I know almost nothing about this world, but that’s because I mostly spent my time haunting the same building and fighting spirits that attacked me. This is actually the first time I decided to walk around since I felt like I was at least strong enough to defend myself.”

Ryosei was prepared for this. Ever since his encounter with Ren, he thought up stories to explain himself to other people. He didn’t expect to need to make a story for other spirits, but he managed to think of one in the time he was waiting inside the room. Kaitlyn seemed to be thinking of something. Ryosei suspected she was looking for holes in Ryosei’s story. She sat there for a few seconds before reaching a decision.

“Hmm… That so? Okay, we’ll let you go.”

“Huh!? Is that really okay, Boss?”

The orange-haired boy shouted in surprise.

“Yeah. We don’t really have anything to disprove his story. I wouldn’t want to keep him any longer if he’s as innocent as he says he is. So, we’ll let him go. However!”

Kaitlyn shifted her gaze from the boy to Ryosei and stared at him with a serious look.

“If we ever see you do anything suspicious around here again, you’ll be stuck in here for a lot longer. Got that?”

“Sure.”

“Good. Well then, I’ll have this guy take care of your release. Orange hair, come with me. You’ve gone on break long enough.”

“Yes ma’am!”

Kaitlyn and the boy left the room, leaving Ryosei and the soldier as the only ones left. The soldier quietly walked behind Ryosei.

“Come on, get up.”

Ryosei did as he said and was escorted outside. But while he was walking out of the building, he asked the soldier behind him.

“Hey, I still don’t know much about this world. Other than the basics, I know nothing. Can you tell me more about it?”

“No. I have a job to do, and it doesn’t involve teaching newborns.”

“But you’re a soldier, aren’t you? Don’t you feel like you have to rescue innocent spirits or something like that?”

“And where did you get that from? A drama movie? Look kid, I’m sure you’ve had your share of tough times in this world. That feeling isn’t a stranger to any of the spirited souls I’ve met. We became ghosts with only our emotions and basic knowledge of earth to work with. No memories of ourselves, or the people we knew. Everyone around you is an enemy, but what’s even worse, is that you, yourself, are your greatest enemy.”

“You mean… people become more conflicted here?”

“Oh? Lucky you. It seems you’re a straightforward person. Must be nice. You can focus on one goal while the rest of us are here have no idea what to do with ourselves. I’ve met a lot of spirits in my time here, and most of them… broke.”

“Is that something I should be asking you to explain? If it's personal, I don’t mind you not telling me.”

“What’s this? Are you actually concerned about me?”

“I may not have had any emotional trouble when I first came here. But I think the past me knows much about emotional trouble firsthand.”

“So much that it’s engraved in your soul, is what you’re saying?”

Ryosei nodded.

“I see. Then maybe that’s why you didn’t have trouble fitting in here. Well, whatever the case may be, I don’t have any interest in it, nor do you even have the ability to tell me about it.”

The soldier stopped Ryosei in the middle of the street in front of the building they left from.

“We’re here. Cinnamon.”

The collar around Ryosei’s neck slowly dissolved into nothingness. He used his hands to discern the collar and confirmed it was gone.

“Thanks. Anyway, I should be going now.”

“Sure, good luck out there.”

Ryosei was about to take off, but before he got too far away, the soldier called out to him.

“Hey!”

Ryosei turned around and directed his eyes to the soldier in the distance.

“I’ll give you a tip! Don’t lose sight of yourself!”

As he finished conveying his message, he turned around and headed back to the café. Keeping the soldier’s words in mind, Ryosei headed to a nearby park.

“Man, I didn’t really get much off of that other than realizing that there’s a lot more I don’t know about this world.”

Ryosei sat on the swing with his thoughts filled with today’s encounters. He tried to make theories but none of them made any sense to him. His mind was in disarray.

“I think I’ll just let Senkyo handle this one… Oh yeah, I almost forgot. I was supposed to wait for Yukai-chan.”

Ryosei looked around but something wasn’t right.

“Wait. What!?”

The red flame that usually marked Yukai’s location was nowhere to be seen. For the longest time, it didn’t disappear from Ryosei’s sight, but for some reason, after his encounter with other spirits, it suddenly disappeared.

He didn’t like the sound of that. It was either coincidence or maybe the spirits somehow realized that Ryosei was related to Yukai and did something to her. Riddled with worry, Ryosei used glimpse to scan the area in front of him. Confirming it was empty, he immediately manifested himself on earth and set himself to head to the café. But before he could even move a step from where he stood, a familiar voice called out to him.

“Oh, you’re finally here, Ryosei-nii-san!”

“Wha!?”

Ryosei jumped in surprise and flicked his head at frightening speeds to the source of the voice. He was speechless and utterly confused. He couldn’t believe the person in front of him. It was Yukai, sitting on the swing beside Ryosei.

“What took you so long? I saw you were in some kind of building then I followed you here. I was calling out to you, could you not hear me?”

Ryosei heard her, but he didn’t respond. After a few seconds, he realized something. Instead of talking to her, his next action was to return to the spirit realm. His surroundings changed as well as Yukai. From her normal physical form, she turned into a red flame. He knew he wasn’t imagining things. Just recently, he saw that Yukai’s flame was nowhere to be seen. And now, for some reason, it was back like it never disappeared to begin with.

“Hm… This might just prove my theory.”

He was satisfied with what he saw and manifested back on earth. He didn’t want to leave Yukai alone for too long after he rudely disappeared on her.

“Sorry about that. I had to check on something.”

“Is that so? Then, do you want to go?”

“Yeah, sure…”

Ryosei and Yukai proceeded to head to Yukai’s apartment. While walking, Ryosei was completely lost in thought. Resulting in a silent walk to their destination. Yukai took notice of his strenuous face and decided to keep quiet until he talked. Upon entering her apartment, Ryosei used his glimpse to scan the room for any spirits present. The moment he confirmed there were none, he finally called out to Yukai.

“Hey, Yukai-chan, could you stay there for a moment?”

“Mhm, sure.”

Yukai stood directly in front of Ryosei.

“Alright.”

Ryosei disappeared and returned to the spirit realm. There, directly in front of him, was a floating red flame. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He cleared his mind of any thoughts and distractions. And the moment he reopened his eyes, the red flame before him was gone, but he didn’t panic like earlier. Instead, he calmly used glimpse and saw Yukai standing in the same place she was before. He stopped using glimpse but the flame was still gone. It wasn’t until a few seconds after he stopped using glimpse did the fire return to his vision.

“So that’s how this works. Interesting.”

Ryosei manifested back on earth. He didn’t talk to Yukai about anything, but instead, he asked her to do something unusual.

“Yukai-chan, what did you see when I disappeared?”

“Hm? I saw a blue flame. That tells me where you are, right? When you’re invisible to other people that flame tells me where you are.”

*“\*It seems she thinks spirits like me go invisible. Well, I can’t tell her about the spirit realm so this misunderstanding is as good as it gets.\*”*

“Yep. Now, could you do me a favor and stop thinking about me?”

“Huh!? W-What do you mean? Are you going to leave!?”

“Ah, no, sorry, I phrased that wrong. I’m just trying to test how these flames work. From what I can tell, these things tell us where each other are when I’m invisible, but it only appears when we’re thinking of the other person. If you stop thinking about me and the blue flame disappears, that will prove my theory.”

Yukai paled when she mistook Ryosei’s intentions at first but calmed down and prepared to help him when she understood what he meant.

“O-Oh, got it. Sorry for the misunderstanding. I’ll do my best.”

“Thanks.”

Ryosei returned to the spirit realm and manifested back 10 minutes later. And the results…

“Uuu~… I-I’m sorry. I couldn’t do it. Whenever I try to force myself not to think about you it only makes the opposite effect. In the end, I couldn’t do it. Sorry…”

“No, that’s fine. There’s no need to be beaten up about it.”

Yukai was a bit unhappy about failing Ryosei, but having him console her from behind made her feel better. The two moved from talking in the entrance to the living room. They were sitting in front of a coffee table with tea ready for each of them.

“There’s the tea too… I forgot that you were a spirit and couldn’t actually drink anything. I feel like I’ve been a bit out of it lately. I’m really useless, aren’t I?”

“No.”

“Ow!”

Ryosei flicked Yukai’s forehead and forcibly grabbed her attention.

“I don’t want to hear any more whining and self-deprecating. You’re one of the few people I can talk like this with. It’s happy seeing that someone still thinks of me as human… Thank you.”

“O-Oh…”

Yukai seemed to be lost for a moment and stared blankly at Ryosei. She didn’t seem to be able to respond, but she stopped being hard on herself. They spent another hour talking to each other after Ryosei decided to leave.

“It’s about time for me to go. You did well today, Yukai-chan.”

He drew near her and extended his hand to pet her head. Both of them knew it was Ryosei’s way of congratulating her. It was how it has always been, but just before he made contact, Yukai let out a weak yet overpowering yell.

“No…!”

She didn’t dodge his hand but closed her eyes like she was bracing herself for something to hit her. It was all unexpected to Ryosei, as a result, he was unable to respond to Yukai’s words in time and placed his hand on her head.

“Eh…?”

Or so he thought. Contrary to his expectations, his hand fazed through her head. He immediately pulled his hand back the moment he realized what happened. He stared at the palm of his hand like he had seen a ghost. It wasn’t until Yukai spoke up did he regain his senses.

“I-I… don’t like that! Stop treating me like a child! I get that you were trying to cheer me on, but petting my head is banned!”

She glared at Ryosei. She was upset, a rare sight. He was a bit taken aback by her sudden outburst, but it was clear in her eyes that she was serious. Her eyes were piercing through his very soul sending him her earnest message. After returning to his senses, he pulled up his arm in front of her and shaped his hand into a fist.

“…Got it. Then, how about this?”

Yukai simply stared at his fist, lost of what to do. She cocked her head while trying to comprehend Ryosei’s gesture.

“It’s a fist bump. Haven’t you heard of it?”

Her mouth broadened and her eyes glistened when he heard what he said. She shaped her hand into a fist just like Ryosei and placed it in front of his fist. She turned to him trying to confirm she was doing it correctly and he responded with a slight nod. She gingerly drew her fist closer to Ryosei’s fist and applied a bit more force to her hand as they made contact.

A quiet tap barely reached their ears as their fists collided with each other. A huge smile appeared on both of their faces as a result. With both parties satisfied, Yukai saw Ryosei out the door as they said their final goodbyes before parting.

**…………**

It was already dark outside before he reached his destination. The only light source nearby was the light coming from the entrance of the hospital before him. Ryosei returned to the spirit realm before entering the hospital. He navigated through the floors until he reached the room Yukai’s mother was admitted. He opened the door and there he saw…

“There’s no doubt about it…”

A dark aura radiated from her. It was pitch black, the epitome of death. It conjured a foul presence, any spirit would fear at the sight of the repulsive abomination. The more Ryosei got closer to her, the more the aura became apparent to him. He had his senses screaming at him to run away at that instant. If he didn’t have the composure to face it, he might have just done so. That was just terrifying it was.

“This is a curse, I’m sure of it. If I wasn’t a spirit, I probably would have no idea. But my senses are screaming at me, telling me all about it. This must be what the instincts of spirits are capable of. Now that I think about it…”

Back when Senkyo and Ryosei were fighting Touma when he was taken over by a curse, his senses reacted like this, or so he thought. If his senses truly reacted, then why were Senkyo and every other hunter able to see it.

*\*No… I’m wrong. What we were seeing at that time was the manifestation of the curse. There was only one person that was able to truly see the curse. It was Shiro. She was able to detect the four sources of the curse… I see. Curses from Zerid can only be seen by Zeldians, while curses from the Spirit Realm can only be seen by spirits. I think this is a safe assumption. I don’t have time to experiment with this, after all.\**

Ryosei tried to extend his hand but he stopped himself from getting any closer and pulled back.

*“\*I can’t. Whatever that curse is, I feel like a spirit like me would get infected by it the moment I touch it. Yukai and the other doctors are able to touch her, but that’s probably because they're human. I can’t risk myself here.\*”*

He used glimpse and scanned around the room and the hallway outside the room. There was no one around. He then turned back to Yukai’s mother and manifested on earth, immediately taking a deep bow.

“I swear to you, I will save you from this curse! That’s why, I ask you, as someone who died without getting rid of their regrets, to forgive your daughter, cherish her, and save her from herself! Please!”

Ryosei shouted with his heart, pouring all of his feelings into the words he was conveying to the bedridden woman in front of him. Although she had her eyes closed and with her body not responding to her mind’s orders, he was hoping, at the very least, that she could hear his plea. There are cases where people in comas are still able to hear their surroundings. He was betting on this possibility to be able to send his personal message to her.

“Hello? Is somebody there?”

The door opened behind him and a nurse scanned the room for any intruders. It was well past visiting hours. But she only saw Yukai’s mother laying on the bed like how she always has. She performed a quick check and cleared the possible hiding spots a person would be able to fit in, but no one else was present.

Later that night, Ryosei returned to Senkyo and entered his body. Their memories transferred to each other, informing them of the other’s activities while they were gone. Senkyo showed visible surprise but then nodded understandingly.

“May I ask why you didn’t pursue Yutei-san with any more questions? You wanted answers just as much as I do.”

*“\*You should stop beating around the bush like that. It doesn’t work too well if you don’t sound the least bit upset. If you want me to show you my resolve, then fine. I care about Yukai-chan, is that wrong?\*”*

“Hehehe, are you sure you should use ‘care’ in this situation? Are you sure the right term isn’t ‘love?’”

*“\*Keep your creepy shipping and imagination limited to fiction, Senkyo. It’ll get really bad if you do that to the wrong person.\*”*

“I know. I guess I’m wrong, for now, that is.”

Senkyo kept teasing Ryosei, but it didn’t take long for him to get back to business.

“Well, at least we know what you and your connection to Yutei-san is. Desire. That much is clear.”

*“\*Yeah. Whenever I’m in the spirit world, we can see each other just by thinking about each other. If we stop thinking about each other, the flame disappears. Since it works even when I’m unconsciously thinking, I almost never notice it disappear.\*”*

“And the only reason you’re able to touch each other is if both of you allow the other to do so. Mutual desire. The only times you haven’t been able to touch each other is if you don’t want to or if Yutei-san doesn’t want to.”

*“\*You’re right. But still, even though we know how this works, we still don’t know why it works.\*”*

“Yep. In the first place, what caused your connection with Yutei-san? Why is it that out of all the spirits and humans, you two are the only two that can make contact with each other?”

*“\*We still have more to learn. But, I’ve decided. There is no way I’m getting Yukai-chan involved with any more of this. I’m sure I don’t need to explain this to you,\*”*

“Definitely.”

Senkyo’s expression had a hint of sadness in it as he answered Ryosei.

*\*Good to see you doing well. It’s making me jealous… He decided to prioritize his feelings over his duty. The moment he first lost sight of Yukai’s flame he must’ve been in a huge shock. So much that it’s like I can feel his emotions just by looking through his memories. If only I had the same resolve as him. Then maybe, this wouldn’t be plaguing my mind so much.\**

“Well, since all of us did a great job today, I’m sure watching a few anime wouldn’t hurt!”

*“\*Go get some rest!\*”*

**Chapter 3: Guardian**

The usual greenery and natural beauty of the forest were warped at night, coating the atmosphere with an eerie sensation. The only sounds that could be heard were the cold, chilling breeze blowing through the air, the diverse songs of the nocturnal creatures, footsteps rustling and crushing the grass and fallen leaves accompanied by the loud grumbling of a single person.

“Ahh, this is so shit! Why the hell did that old man send me here in the first place?!”

It was Watanabe Itsuki walking through the woods by his lonesome at the dead of night, his sanity slowly deteriorating but never failing to curse the man who brought him to this situation. He was wearing a black Gi, the battle uniform of brutes of the Konjou Clan, along with several bandages all over his body.

“It’s so fucking cold! Who the hell was the shithead that designed these things!?”

It was quite evident that he was unhappy, miserable in fact. It all started earlier that day, but thinking about it carefully, this was inevitable the moment he was assigned to train under his new mentor some time over a week ago.

Monday of last week, the day after the battle royale was concluded. The school was over, and Itsuki was off to meet his new mentor assigned to him by the Konjou clan. He wasn’t told who it was, but he was instructed to enter the basement of a building separated from the castle, but still within the protected grounds.

Upon arriving downstairs, he was met with a long corridor with doors extending to different rooms to the sides and noticeable huge iron double doors at the very end. Despite not receiving other orders, Itsuki didn’t hesitate and walked forward to the very end of the hallway and tried to open the door. He was going to train to fight in life-threatening battles, and what other room felt appropriate than the ominous iron giants, he thought. However, it didn’t budge so he called out to the other side.

“Heyy!! I’m here, open the door!”

There was no answer. Itsuki kept beating the door and shouting, getting irritated the longer he was left unanswered. While he was trying to break down the door, a kunai was hurled towards his back.

“…Ha?”

Despite the sudden attack on his blind spot, Itsuki was able to catch the kunai in midair before it even reached him. Normally, he would immediately enter combat and charge the person behind him, but the kunai was aimed directly beside his head, it wasn’t going to hit anything but the door. He didn’t immediately counterattack, but he was still enraged. The assailant threw a deadly object in his direction, intentional or not, it still put his life on the line.

He turned around with bloodshot eyes. Peering over his shoulder, he saw an old man standing at the other end of the hallway.

“Who’re you? Do ya really think I’ll let you slide just because you weren’t going to hit me? What the fuck do you want?”

He turned around and faced the old man while slowly approaching him with heavy steps, anger in his eyes all the while radiating a threatening aura. The old man spoke.

“Oho? Already worked up, I see. Well? What are you going to do?”

“I’ll tell you… WITH MY FISTS!”

Itsuki dropped his bag and used flash strike to quickly close the distance between them. Since the distance was too far for a normal flash strike to cover, he used the walls as footholds and repelled off them, gaining speed and power all the while.

“Too slow.”

He jumped to reach the old man, used his empowered punch, aiming for his head as he dove towards him. The old man moved slightly, leaning to the side without even moving his legs. The air pressure from his punch grazed the old man, indicated by the noticeable sparks on his barrier. He was a brute class.

With his fist dodged, Itsuki kicked with his knee and thrust his elbow downwards, trying to pincer the old man’s head as he passed by. The old man shifted to a backflip and dodged Itsuki’s follow-up attack. He crashed behind the old man and destroyed some of the stairs. His improper form and haphazard movements should have granted him no time to prepare for the impact, but contrary to the old man’s expectations, Itsuki landed safely, crouching on the rubble beneath him to regain his balance. Just before he landed, he used the stronger force from thrusting his elbow to spin his body around and point his legs behind him.

“Bond Manifest: Monkey!”

Itsuki made various hand gestures before using another flash strike and charging at the old man. He stopped in front of him and threw another punch at him. The old man threw his arm up and swept Itsuki’s arm away to parry his attack, so he followed up with another punch from his other fist, but it was too slow. The old man grabbed hold of his parried arm and pulled him, making Itsuki lose his balance, and threw a fist into his solar plexus. His barrier instantly shattered but reduced the power of the old man’s strike for Itsuki to take the damage and launch his counterattack.

Itsuki threw a tiger claw to the old man’s chin, however, that power wasn’t enough to destroy his barrier. He saw it was just a desperate attack from Itsuki, in a time of panic, he disregarded the enemy’s abilities and used an attack that would have been effective it if weren’t for his barrier. The old man simply stared at the tiger claw strike with disappointment, letting Itsuki realize his foolishness once he gets denied by the barrier. Suddenly, his eyes opened wide in surprise as two explosions struck him from the front and behind, specifically, from Itsuki’s palms. It was the brute class offensive ability: Burst. An explosion ignited on a concentrated spirit power. Both blasts erupted at point-blank range on the old man’s barrier. They were not enough to destroy it, but weakened his barrier enough for Itsuki’s tiger claw to penetrate, shattering the barrier and reaching the old man’s chin.

“Enough.”

The old man uttered before Itsuki’s attack could make contact. But what of it? Itsuki did not have the skill to stop a full-power attack at a moment’s notice, nor did he plan on doing so, but strangely, he did just that. It was uncharacteristic of him to listen to someone so readily, especially since that very someone was a person who threatened his life.

“Hm. I must say, you exceeded my expectations. You are an untamed beast that solves everything through brute force, so I didn’t have high expectations to begin with, but it seems like your combat senses make up for that. Rejoice, you have potential, child.”

“Enough talking! What did you do to me!?”

The old man stepped back and circled Itsuki who was standing still like a statue. He was frozen in place, still stuck in the same position as he was earlier. The old man looked him in the eye.

“I am your new mentor, Kosuke Sakurai. Do not think that just because I am old, I would go easy on you. I have yet to go senile. Come quick.”

Kosuke let go of his arm and turned to the iron door behind him. Suddenly, Itsuki regained control of his body. He didn’t understand what happened except for the fact that Kosuke was able to freeze him somehow.

“Raaaahh!!!”

“I said enough!”

Itsuki pounced behind his back with his fist ready but Sakurai responded with a roundhouse kick.

“GAAH—!!”

*\*Bang! …Thud!\**

“K-Ku…!”

His kick was so powerful that it instantly broke Itsuki’s regenerated barrier and sent him flying to the wall beside them. He fell to the ground with his hands on his stomach trying to bear the pain he took from Sakurai’s kick.

“Come on, get moving. You won’t be able to last out there if that’s enough to do you in.”

Sakurai proceeded to walk towards the iron door without looking back at Itsuki.

“This old man…!”

He forced himself to stand back up and followed behind him, albeit reluctantly. Sakurai placed his hand on the iron door, then a blue light traced the gap between the double doors. When the light disappeared, he pushed the doors and revealed the other side with ease. Itsuki peered through the other side only to be confused.

“What’s this? Did you forget to pay the electricity bill or somethin’?”

“No, this is a test.”

“Ha?”

The other side was pitch black. There wasn’t a single light source apart from the light coming from the hallway, but even so, nothing but the wooden floor was lit up.

“Go on.”

“What the!?”

Kosuke pushed him inside the room and closed the door behind him.

“Oi! What the fuck do you mean!? You haven’t even said anything! The hell am I supposed to do here!?”

Itsuki ran to the door and banged against it while shouting his complaints as loud as he could, but he received no response. After getting tired of standing around the entrance, he decided to navigate himself through the dark room on his own.

After walking blind for a few seconds, he arrived at what he thought was the middle of the room. It was then that something hit him. Hard.

“GUOO—!!”

Whatever it was that hit him, it resembled what anyone would think getting hit by a truck would be like. He was flung to the wall after getting hit. His barrier took the brunt of the damage, but that didn’t save him from the shockwave. The impact was so powerful that he was sure if he didn’t spend so much time shouting his complaints and giving time for his barrier to regenerate, he would’ve died right then and there. He tried to recover, but that wasn’t going to be as simple as he thought.

Before he got back up, something hit him from the side, pushing him back to the general direction he came from. He couldn’t see. He was just being flung around in the darkness like a helpless ragdoll. This infuriated Itsuki. He didn’t come just to be toyed around with. He came to become powerful.

But despite that, he still got hit by the same thing as earlier. The only difference was, he dug his limbs into that object. He didn’t get knocked back and had the chance to identify the object. It was most likely a huge stone ball. Once it reached its peak, the stone ball dropped and swung to the other side. Finally, Itsuki took this chance to cross the room.

He jumped off the ball and made a beeline to where he thought the end of the room was. It was then that he was hit by another stone ball. Itsuki did the same and clung to the ball and waited for it to return to the middle of the room where he continued his sprint. Since he was expecting to get hit, he prepared for this by focusing his spirit power on strengthening his barrier to lessen the damage as much as possible.

After clearing a few meters, he came to a sudden stop and waited a few seconds before continuing. He used his instincts to calculate the gaps between the stone balls. He repeated that as many times as he could and breezed through without getting hit.

“Ha-ha! Take that old man! This is won’t be enough to stop me!”

Five minutes later. Sakurai opened the door and was met with the same dark room. But now, he reached out to the wall by the double doors. Placing his hand on the wall caused it to emit blue light and drew a square around his hand. Lights from above lit up the room to reveal the contents of the chamber. Multiple stone balls were swinging like pendulums all the way to the end of the long hall. In addition, there were logs placed on both sides of the room that moved like pistons. Anyone that stood there would probably get knocked back to the middle of the room.

And over a distance in front of him, was Itsuki who was lying on the floor clearly beaten up by the stone balls. He wasn’t even halfway across the room. Sakurai placed his hand on the same stone panel that he used to turn on the lights and the same blue light drew another square of the same form, but this time, it stopped the stone balls and log pistons from swinging and thrusting. He approached the half-dead Itsuki and touched his forehead. It was then that the light returned to Itsuki’s eyes and their blurry state slowly cleared as they focused on him.

“Good, you are alive. Follow me when you feel like it. You have five minutes to rest. Any more and you will regret it.”

Itsuki tilted his head to the side to see Sakurai’s back heading towards the exit.

“That arrogant geezer… Tsk!”

Itsuki immediately, but slowly picked himself up and slowly walked towards Sakurai. They returned to the first floor of the building they were in and entered another room. The inside was highly peculiar. It was just an empty room with a lone chair in the middle almost like some kind of interrogation room. Kosuke signaled Itsuki to sit on the chair. He threw himself on it with a huge sigh, trying to relax his body from the exhaustion. Sakurai didn’t like that too much.

“Hey! What do you think you are doing? Sit up straight. Just because you’re tired doesn’t mean you can laze around! You are in the middle of training!”

“What’s your problem, old man!? You call that shit training? That was abuse! You didn’t even begin to tell me anything! You attacked me and locked me in a torture room!”

“Oh? What? You could not handle it? I did not know I was dealing with a wimp. Maybe we should call this off after all.”

“OI! WHAT THE HELL DID YOU CALL ME!?”

Itsuki stood up into an aggressive stance, seemingly ready to pounce on Sakurai at any time. Sakurai glared back at him as he taunted him.

“I said you are a wimp. So? What are you going to do?”

Itsuki growled as he ground his teeth. For a second, it looked like he was about to let loose. But unexpectedly, he held back and sat on the chair in a proper position. He was still annoyed, but kept it in and swallowed his pride.

“Good.”

Sakurai made a satisfied nod and walked around the room.

“So, do you know why I did all of that?”

“Ha?”

“Why I attacked you, and why I trapped you in that room. Do you know the answer?”

“Like I’d know what some old man is thinking. You’re insane!”

“Is that how you talk to the person training you? Answer the question!”

“Tsk…”

He clicked his tongue and scratched his head before sighing into submission.

“It’s like that isn’t it? You’re trying to test me. You said it yourself earlier.”

“Good to know that you actually use your head at times.”

“Hey, I’m trying to cooperate here!”

Sakurai ignored him.

“I don’t suppose you know what kind of test it is, do you?”

“It’s to find out my capabilities or something like that. That loudmouth did the same to me before.”

“That ‘loud mouth’ you are talking about is Yamazaki Dai. Address him properly.”

“Like I care.”

*\*Slam!!\**

Sakurai swatted the back of Itsuki’s chair with a wooden sword.

“It looks like I’m going to have to teach you proper discipline first.”

“Wh-Wha!?”

After about an hour of trying to discipline Itsuki, they got to the point where Sakurai was willing to continue their lesson.

“Ok, ok. Just continue the lesson, old gee… teacher.”

Obviously, it didn’t go too well. But Sakurai let him slide to continue the lesson.

“Let us review your fighting yesterday at the battle royale.”

“Ha-ha, I know I did great on that one!”

“It was utterly stupid.”

“Huh?”

“What you did yesterday, was absolutely stupid.”

Itsuki was baffled by what he had heard. In his solo fight with the other hunters, he almost lost but he managed to pick himself back up and continue fighting until he won. There were even more experienced hunters as his opponents but he still managed to pull off a win. The storm of questions in Itsuki’s mind was about to be answered by Sakurai.

“When you were fighting, you kept using flash strike whenever you wished. That was stupid.”

“What’s so stupid about that? It’s an easy skill.”

“You idiot!”

“OW!”

Sakurai smacked his head with his wooden sword.

“What’s your problem!?”

“You do not think of the consequences. Do you even know what you’re doing to your body when you use flash strike too much?”

“What? Of course not. You just power up your legs then you go whoosh! What so bad about that?”

Sakurai sighed as he facepalmed.

“‘Whoosh,’ huh? I’ll have to have a talk with Yamazaki-dono later.”

He tapped Itsuki’s chair to get his attention.

“Listen up, the flash strike is not an all-powerful move that makes you go ‘whoosh’ magically. That move shapes the spirit power in your body as temporary muscles. Whenever you use that move, it uses those fake muscles to propel your body at high speeds. In the process, it destroys those fake muscles the moment you launch because of its destructive power. You then create another set of fake muscles and make them heavier to slow yourself down, or another set to absorb all the force if you want to land. If you make a single mistake, you can end up saying goodbye to your legs. That’s why not too many hunters use it. Let alone using it back-to-back.”

“Then why can that shittaku use it like that? Is there something he’s doing that I’m not?”

“No. There is nothing like that. He’s using consecutive flash strikes with the same consequences. The only difference between you and him is that he has Ryosei with him. With him in control, it does not matter if Yukou-dono’s body is not fit. As long as his mind can keep up with his actions, he can use it as many times as he wants.”

“So you’re telling me I can do the same things he’s doing as long as I can keep up? That’s easy—”

“No.”

“Ha?”

“I will not allow you. What happened yesterday was beginner’s luck. If I do not deem you fit, you are not to use flash strike consecutively.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! I’ll show you!”

Itsuki got up from his seat and used flash strike to close the distance between him and Kosuke. He was planning on punching him and using flash strike again, repeating the action to prove his point, but before he even landed the first punch…

*\*Slap!\**

“GAA—!!”

Kosuke slapped him mid-travel and sent him flying across the room. Writhing on the floor yet again, Kosuke approached him.

“Listen up! You are nowhere near being a strong hunter! You are weak! You realize that which is why you came here, is it not!? If you keep riding your high horse, you have no place here in the Konjou Clan! If you do not shape up, you will stay weak with only your pride to protect you! Now, this is your last chance! Stand up and apologize or leave this room immediately!”

Itsuki stayed silent. He stopped moving the moment Kosuke began his spiel. He listened carefully like every word hit something inside him. He then slowly stood up as straight as a stick, stared at Kosuke’s eyes, showing his determination, and bowed as low as he could while shouting the words with all his heart.

“I’m sorry for my rudeness! …It will never happen again. That’s why… I want you to make me strong by teaching me your ways!”

“Good. Now, let’s continue the lesson.”

From that day on, Itsuki continued his grisly training with Kosuke. He was taught how to properly use his power as a brute. Day in and day out, he faced many lessons and painful tests without complaint, bearing his hardship by clenching his fists and using those very ones to take on his obstacles. He took everything head-on and proved his growth through results. It was then that Tuesday night of the next week arrived.

“Focus. The moment you enter this room, the test will begin. Remember what I taught you and you will be fine.”

“I know.”

Itsuki took deep breaths and prepared himself before a set of iron double doors. Kosuke opened the doors and revealed nothing but darkness. It was the same as before.

“Getting cold feet?”

“Not a chance. I’ll clear this thing 1-minute tops.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Now go!”

Kosuke signaled the beginning of the test. Itsuki ran straight into the dark room. The door closed behind him, closing off his only light source. His vision should’ve been pitch black, but for some reason, multiple lines of blue light appeared on both his sides, on the floor and on the walls, outlining the room and showing the distance of his run.

It was one of the basic skills of a hunter. Espy. The ability to see spirit power inside objects. In this situation, espy was showing him the shape of the room and the places it was connected to.

*\*Clang!!\**

“Kgh!”

There was no warning, not even a sound. But multiple huge blades connected to metal chains shot at him from both sides. But he didn’t stop, nor did he slow down. The blades hit his barrier, making a loud metallic noise that reverberated around the room as it deflected every blade.

*“\*You are a brute. Whether your goal is to protect or to press the attack, do not let anything stop you. Getting hit is not the end of you. Make a decision and follow through. You have no time to hesitate.\*”*

Itsuki remembered Kosuke’s words from his training. It echoed in his mind like a spirit haunting him.

“Even when he’s not here he doesn’t know when to shut up! Hh…!”

*\*Booooom!!\**

He sensed the danger and jumped just before the floor and the ceiling exploded out of nowhere.

*\*Smash…!\**

The sound of glass shattering reached his ear as the explosion destroyed the last of his barrier’s durability. He was too slow, but despite that, he didn’t stop running.

*“\*Your barrier is just another layer of your thick defense; do not depend on it. Do not falter just because it is gone!\*”*

All of the sudden, the walls from the side propelled at him at insane speeds. He had no barrier and only had his skin to protect him. But regardless, he thrust both of his hands to the walls. With the reaction time even faster than the speed of the walls, he touched both of them and the walls were immediately propelled back. It was by no means that his brute strength was the one that pushed the thick, solid walls away.

*“\*Spirits are beings that are completely made out of spirit power. As humans, we can never use the true potential of spirit power as they do. But that does not mean that we cannot completely imitate them. Poltergeist. The ability to control or produce sound and to control or fine-tune objects.\*”*

Itsuki used poltergeist to repel the walls. Much like all the contraptions inside the room, all of them are powered by the poltergeist ability. This is also the reason why he couldn’t hear the sounds of moving chains on the first set of traps since it didn’t use machinery to launch the blades.

As Itsuki continued running, the floor below him sank downwards and revealed a wall of spikes around him. The spikes were as thin as needles and spread close enough so that no one could fit their feet between the gaps. But that didn’t stop him. He kept running towards the wall of spikes, and just before he reached it, he jumped in mid-air and propelled himself upwards like he was jumping between the side of buildings. He didn’t use the wall of spikes as walls, but the very air itself. It was wind magic that Ryosei used in the battle royale. Although brutes fight with spirit power, they can still use a small amount of magic embedded in their Gi.

The moment he reached the peak, he was met with a huge log that swung at him the moment he got back up top. Itsuki used the momentum from his jumps to keep jumping upward and propelled himself straight past the log using air footholds. The end was near. It wasn’t but a few more meters before he reached it. And at that moment…

*\*Rumble rumble rumble\**

The floor in front of him, the very block that stood between him and the finish rose from the ground and blocked his path. The block was roughly 3-meters of a thick, solid wall. It wasn’t a hard obstacle; he could just use poltergeist to bring it back down. That’s what a normal person would think. But not Itsuki.

“Like hell I’ll stop for this!”

From the very start, he never stopped moving. No matter what the obstacle he kept running with nothing to stop him. If he used poltergeist, he would’ve had to wait for it to go down. Even though it was a mere half-second of waiting, it would’ve stopped him. And the only other solution in his head was.

“Outta my way!!”

He rammed straight through the wall and busted right through it. And beyond that huge wall, was a panel with blue light surrounding it. He placed his hand on it and used his spirit power to activate it. The lights opened, the traps stopped functioning, and the iron door at the other side of the room opened, revealing Kosuke who was already staring inside the room.

“58.43 seconds. It looks like you can keep your word. Congratulations.”

His voice echoed through the room and reached Itsuki’s ears. The moment he heard those words brought an overjoyed expression on his face and cheered as loud as he could while pumping his fist in the air.

“UUOOAAAAA!!! I TOLD YOU I COULD DO IT! I FUCKING TOLD YOU!!”

While he was cheering from the other end of the room, Kosuke examined the events that transpired while he was waiting from the other side. There was nothing broken in the room except for the mad-sized hole at the very end of the course.

*“This kid… He rammed through the wall with his body. The other brutes either stopped to punch it and destroy it as a whole or stopped to try and use poltergeist to bring it back down. The people that tried to use poltergeist either gave up or had to destroy it by punching. After all, that last obstacle is a test of courage. When that block rose, another block moved below it to lock it in place, preventing anyone to use poltergeist to take the easy way out. While the ones who punched it had to channel all their power into their punches, protecting their fists while destroying the wall. But this kid rammed straight through it. This was no simple trick like strengthening his body. Judging from the small cracks on the floor right before the block, he used flash strike, body strengthening, and kindle.”*

Kindle. The ability to summon and shape spirit power outside one’s body. Usage of spirit power was limited to the body and the objects it is in contact with. Two prime examples of this are a brute making a barrier around one’s body, and whenever a hunter enters the spirit realm. To enter, they make a circle of their own spirit power to summon a gate to the other world. Although a person can summon it outside their body, spirit power can only last 10 seconds before disintegrating.

*“He molded the barrier on his arms and used that as the horns that took the brunt of the blow and destroyed the wall. The main power comes from the spirit power while he supported it with his own body… I am certain I heard his barrier breaking earlier, but he was able to put up another barrier powerful enough to penetrate the wall. I was right. He has potential.”*

Itsuki walked up to Kosuke.

“See that? That was me. Come on, let's advance to the next level!”

“Enough. This was only level 3 of this training facility. You have time to grow, do not rush it.”

“Ugh, fine. Well, is that all or do you have another lesson?”

“We will end it here. Get some rest, you have a busy day ahead of you tomorrow.”

“Alright!”

Itsuki cheered and headed for the stairs leading to the first floor of the building. But it didn’t take him long to realize an anomaly behind Kosuke’s words.

“…Wait, what do you mean, ‘a busy day?’ Tomorrow’s just another Wednesday. Are we doing something?”

“I’m glad you noticed. If you did not, you would have had even less time to prepare. You do not have to go to school tomorrow.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

Itsuki was confused. He was sure tomorrow was just a normal school day like any other. No holidays or any events that might postpone school.

“We have connections to Honshou Academy. I excused you for 2 days since you will be going on a mission.”

“What!? Isn’t this too sudden? Why are you only telling me this now!?”

“Because I was waiting if you could pass this test, of course. And now that you did, I am assigning you to your first mission as a hunter of the Konjou clan.”

“…I see. So you need my power so bad that you had to ask me the moment I proved myself worthy, hm, hm. Very well, I’ll take on this measly mission of yours.”

“As I said before, being conceited will only lead to defeat.”

“Can’t you take a joke?”

“Good. Then, come back here at 7 in the morning. You will have to prepare. Because you are going to Hokkaido.”

“…Huh?”

**…………**

Wednesday afternoon, somewhere in the wilderness of Hokkaido. The forest was thick, lively with chirping birds and wandering critters. The sun was shining brightly with almost no clouds. The wind blew through the air cooling down the hot temperature. Itsuki arrived seemingly tired from his long journey.

“I know this is a mission and all, but does it have to be this far? I had to get on a plane, take a taxi, and walk all the way over here! Where the hell is this anyway? That taxi driver gave me a map with a mark just beside this lake. It must have been one of the old man’s subordinates. Just how many connections does this clan have?”

Itsuki stared at the lake and examined his surroundings. There was nothing out of place or anything to be skeptical about. It was just a normal forest. He found himself a convenient rock to sit on. As he was sitting doing nothing, he was reminded of the conversation he had with Kosuke just before he left.

**…………**

“Remember, your mission is to find the rumored half-moon wolf. We have confirmed sightings that the wolf is a creature from Zerid. Do try to not be a bother.”\*

“…”

The both of them stared at each other in silence. No one seemed to have anything else to add.

“What are you waiting for? Go on.”

“What?? That’s all? When I find it, then what? Are you sending me on a sightseeing trip or something?”

Itsuki was right to be confused. His only orders were to find the wolf, nothing else followed that. But if that was really all of it, then this wouldn’t have been a mission in the first place. There must have been something Kosuke forgot to mention, but he didn’t add a single thing.

“No. That’s all. Now go or you will miss your flight!”

“EHHH!???”

**…………**

“Jeez, would it kill that guy to be a bit more specific? For all I know this might be some kind of fake mission to get rid of me or something. Gah, whatever! I need to set up camp before it gets dark.”

Itsuki got up and dropped a long bag on the ground which contained his tent. He was planning on camping out since his mission involved going out at night and searching for the half-moon wolf. A mystical wolf that was infamous to the locals.

Stories mention of people catching sight of its silver fur glistening under the moonlight, reflecting its celestial light to their very eyes, but suddenly disappearing into the shadows as if being swallowed by the darkness itself, returning to nonexistence. As bright as the moon atop the highlands and pitch-black upon entering the shadows. That was the reason it was called the half-moon wolf. There have been many claims of sightings and hearing its howls at night since a year ago. No one has concrete proof of its existence, leaving it as a myth told by the locals.

Kosuke never told Itsuki anything else about the half-moon wolf except for the fact that it exists and that it came from Zerid. There wasn’t much information, but he was already used to that. He probably didn’t need any more information to complete the mission which is why Kosuke never said anything else, that’s what Itsuki thought. He trusted him so much that he was fine with this kind of treatment.

“Alright, this should be fine.”

Itsuki finished setting up the tent and stored the rest of his belongings inside it. Since he had nothing else to do, he returned to the rock he sat on earlier. He breathed a long sigh releasing the strain on his body before sitting down. There wasn’t anything else to look at besides trees and water, a boring sight to others, but it was quite the opposite to Itsuki.

“This lake looks nice… Reminds me of that time we went camping when we were kids.”

Itsuki turned to the forest, looking through the thick trees with no clear subject. He was lost in thought, reminiscing an old memory.

“So that’s what happened that day…”

He stood up and headed into the forest. He traveled for a while in silence while taking in the nature around him. He scouted the area and found hills that provided a good view of the area and a few interesting areas that may have led to caves. Of course, he didn’t pay them any more than a glace. He had no time for cave exploring.

Having finished his scout, he sat down by a tree, ate a snack, and drank a bottle of water. It was about 5 in the afternoon, just around an hour before sunset. There was nothing but trees around him. When he finished eating, he tried to get up but his hand landed on something as he was getting up.

“Hm, a rock.”

He got up and stared at the tree he was sitting on. His eyes kept shifting from the rock on his palm, the tree in front of him, and the area around him.

*“\*It didn’t happen here, I’m sure, but it's someplace similar. Inside a forest like this, standing against a tree like this, with frightening growling like this, and finding a convenient rock on the ground like this… is where it all started.\*”*

He recalled a distant memory, one so far back that it wouldn’t have been strange if it completely deteriorated, but it was something so significant that he could recall all the details just like it was yesterday. He was experiencing nostalgia, like pictures flying through his mind. He narrowed his eyes at a specific spot in front of the tree. His eyes gleamed with renewed resolve from the memories that transpired in a similar location.

“Hm? Growling?”

When he snapped out of his reverie, he realized something. This very location was indeed similar to his past memories, but for some reason, even the growling that was supposedly only his memory was still resounding through his ears even now. It was then that he realized it wasn’t coming from his memory.

Itsuki turned to the source of the threatening growl. There, he saw a wolf that was a distance away, cautiously observing him. It looked like any other wolf with grey fur, nothing about it had any signs that it came from another world except for the fact that it was standing right in front of him. Wolves are extinct in Japan, leaving no other questions in Itsuki’s mind.

“Oh? Isn’t that nice! You saved me the trouble of finding you! Looks like I’ll be sleeping on a bed later if I finish this quickly!”

The wolf quickly turned around and ran away.

“HEY!”

Itsuki gave chase. The wolf was weaving through the obstacles of the forest and so was Itsuki. He wasn’t getting slowed by anything but the distance just kept widening. It wasn’t that the wolf was better at clearing the forest, it was just that Itsuki wasn’t fast enough. At this rate, he’ll lose the wolf.

“Don’t think you’ll get away! W-What was it again? That magic that makes me faster…”

He tried to think of the spell from the top of his head.

“Wind, make my legs faster. Uh, B-Bless me with your fight to create my path. Flash Speed!”

Itsuki chanted, but nothing happened. He was still falling behind the wolf. He didn’t feel any change or anything like that.

“Goddammit! Why the hell did they have to make this chant so complicated?! It doesn’t even make sense!”

He realized he didn’t chant the spell correctly, which is why the magic didn’t activate. But realization didn’t change the fact that he won’t be able to activate it. If a spell isn’t chanted correctly word for word, it will not activate. That’s what they’ve been taught by Freda on the week they became allied with the clan.

“Then I’ll just have to do this the old-fashioned way—”

*“\*You are allowed to use flash strike, but never consecutively. I have not allowed you that yet. Remember, flash strike is not an all-powerful skill. It has its flaws. Do not depend on it.\*”*

Just before Itsuki was about to use flash strike, he remembered Kosuke’s warning about the skill. He gritted his teeth in frustration. He couldn’t think of anything else he could use to catch up. He searched his surroundings for anything to help, but nothing came to mind.

“Ah, fuck it! Whatever happens, happens!”

Itsuki empowered his legs, preparing to launch himself at the wolf using flash strike. In an instant, Itsuki was able to close the distance by half. He was still behind, but he didn’t enter another flash strike. He used flash strike upwards to avoid the obstacles, and as he was falling down, he stretched his arms up the air to grab hold onto a branch and used it as a swing to close even more distance.

The wolf peeked back as it was running away. Seeing the distance Itsuki cleared in an instant made it pick up the pace. The gap between them was enough to be cleared in a single flash strike, but he refused to do so. Instead, he empowered his hands and arms to continuously swing from branch to branch like a monkey.

“I got you now! Prepare yourself!”

He sped through the air swinging in perfect pendulums until he made his final swing, launching himself into the air and falling directly on top of the fleeing wolf. If the wolf continued to run, he would land directly on it. Noticing that, the wolf stopped and let out a booming howl at him.

“AROOOOOO!!!!!”

“What!?”

It wasn’t any normal howl. As the wolf stopped, Itsuki overshot and before he could even look behind him, everything around him turned dark. It was like it instantly became night. Normally, he would think that this was the spirit world, but this was different. On the few meters that he could barely see, everything around him was still colored like earth and none of it was similar to glowing crystals. His vision was impaired. He could only see a few meters away from him. He couldn’t the sky or even the trees over a few meters.

Upon landing, he could hear growling wolves from all around him. They surrounded him like cornered prey. He scanned around him and saw the same wolves lurking on the edge of his vision. Their heads became visible but the other half of their bodies were still hidden within the darkness.

“I remember this! It’s called dark magic. It can make illusions and stuff. Fine, I’ll take you on!”

Itsuki stood still and readied himself for his opponents.

*“\*Perception Field!\*”*

Nothing changed. The wolves began their attack coming from all sides of Itsuki, but he didn’t falter. He twisted his trunk to the side and launched a punch with his right hand to the nearest wolf, knocking it back. Meanwhile, he used his other arm to reach below the neck of an oncoming wolf pouncing to his side and smashed it on another wolf as he returned to his normal position. He then launched a roundhouse kick followed by a straight punch. That took out a total of four wolves, sending the wolf hit by the roundhouse kick flying into two other wolves while he grounded another wolf from below him.

A total of six wolves came in to attack, four aiming for his legs while the other two pounced above him. There was no way he could protect himself with just his limbs, but that didn’t matter. He reached both of his arms up to the two wolves above him. He grabbed hold of their heads with a vice grip and bashed them into each other. Meanwhile, before the other wolves reached his legs, he stomped the ground, creating a shockwave that temporarily confused the wolves. It slowed them down, but in the end, they reached Itsuki.

“Damn. That didn’t take them out. Looks like I’m gonna need some more training!”

He didn’t scream in pain. That was only natural. After all, the wolves didn’t even reach his skin. They were blocked by his barrier, stuck with their fangs floating just above his skin. He launched them away by kicking other incoming wolves with both his feet as hard as he can. He continued fighting the wolves, keeping his ground while he was at it.

Itsuki’s fighting wasn’t perfect. He left openings for the enemies to ponce onto whenever he was attacking. In fact, there were more openings than the number of wolves that attacked each time, but then why was it that he was barely hit by any of the wolves?

That was because of his skill, Perception Field. It’s a skill that uses spirit power to sense anything around him within a 5-meter radius. The moment they enter, the speed they move in, their exact location, whether they were in the air or on the ground, he was able to sense them all. It was a skill that allowed him to attack without the worry of what was around him. That was because he already knew where they were. Although it was important to keep a tight defense, a beginner like him wouldn’t be able to hold that, so he used this skill to close his openings only when he needed to.

After defending himself against the wolves, his vision returned to normal. He immediately searched his surroundings but the wolves were already gone. There was an orange tint to his surroundings, it was already sunset.

“You coward!! Come back here and fight me like a man!”

Itsuki wasn’t too happy about it. He shouted his anger to the air but only received silence in return. There was nothing else he could do about it. Being forced to accept the results, he clicked his tongue before walking away from the scene.

“Hm… I wondered what the ruckus was all about. I see an annoying human fighting my prey. I think he will be a nuisance. I must dispose of… no. I can use him. I see it now, the end of my hunt!”

An unknown voice was coming from within the trees. A spectator that seemed to be plotting an evil scheme. There wasn’t a shadow that suggested another person was there, but for some reason, they were able to witness the fight that occurred.

**…………**

“Mm~ Ichika’s cooking really is incredible!”

The sun had set and the moon was high up in the sky. The forest was covered in darkness and the only light sources around were coming from the radiant moon above and a lone tent by the lake. Inside it, Itsuki was enjoying the bento box Ichika prepared for him earlier that day.

She woke up early and prepared his lunch and dinner. He never intended for her to make his food. Even he was speechless the moment she handed him the two boxes. Yesterday night, when he got back home, he told his family about his little excursion. Of course, he disguised his true intentions with a story Kosuke made… with a few changes.

“What the hell even is a Waddler club? For a secret organization, that name is sooo fucking lame.”

Itsuki finished all of his food and neatly stored it back in his bag. Having finished his dinner, he got out of his normal clothes and switched into the Konjou clan’s Gi. It was then that he realized that he wouldn’t have been able to use magic earlier when he was chasing the wolf, even if he chanted correctly. Not only that, what he was trying to cast was mid-tier magic. He couldn’t remember what it was, but there was some kind of limits for brutes on magic. A brute’s Gi also functions as a spectral. He didn’t bother to ask why that was because he was uninterested, but now that he had experienced the lack of tools at his disposal, he thought that learning a few magic tricks wasn’t too bad.

He was now ready for battle. He planned on searching the whole night until he found the wolf again. It was going to be harder to search at night, but he had something prepared for this. He took out a hunting flashlight from his bag.

“Hehe! This will be the greatest weapon! Look at this range! Whua! Foo! Hiya!!”

Itsuki flashed his light all around the tent with exaggerated movements. It seems like it was his first time seeing a powerful flashlight. Having equipped all of his gear, he got out of his tent to begin his hunt.

“Now, where should I start… huh?”

He looked around him to decide where to go, but even before rotating in a full circle, it was quite obvious where his first destination was. Smoke was floating up the sky in the direction he was facing. It was not the same amount of smoke a normal campfire would make. He hurried his way over to the source of the smoke.

He ran through the forest with his light on to warn him of the oncoming obstacles to prevent him from slowing down. As he was getting closer, he could see tinges of yellow and orange reflecting from the smoke and through the trees. He reached glade, giving him a good look at what was happening.

Although it was obvious from the smoke, it was a forest fire. The trees were engulfed in a large burning flame. Smoke and embers polluted the air, making it hard for him to breathe. Normally, anyone faced with this dangerous situation would run the other way and take their belongings out of the forest, but not Itsuki.

“There are only a few trees burning. Whatever caused it was recent. I have to prevent this from spreading!”

He ran over to the closest unaffected tree to the fire and placed his hands on it. He used his spirit energy to increase its toughness. With enough spirit energy, the tree will be strong enough so that it wouldn’t catch fire.

“Alright!”

Itsuki moved from tree to tree, transferring his spirit power and strengthening every single one. He had to withstand the polluted air and burning heat that was coming in front of him. Although he had a barrier, if he stood near fire long enough, the heat would transfer from his barrier all the way to his skin. He had to be quick.

His plan was working. The trees he strengthened weren’t catching any fire. If he successfully cages off the forest fire with the strengthened trees, the fire inside will take itself out and disappear. But just as he was about to finish…

“Cough, cough… just a few more—GUH!!”

A dark ball hit him in the chest and knocked him back. When he turned to its source, he saw a wolf. But it wasn’t the same one he saw earlier. Its fur was black with tinges of white. It came out of the shadows with a vicious look, glaring at Itsuki with bloodshot eyes, and growled threateningly as it approached him.

“What!? You’re…”

Itsuki was surprised when the flames from the forest fire revealed the shape of the wolf. It had a normal wolf’s body but it had two tails instead of one. Whether or not the wolf he saw earlier was another illusion or not, this wolf was clearly the one he was looking for. He stood up and faced the wolf, that was when he was hit with another surprise.

“Grrryou… You did this…! You burned the forest, now it’s my turn to return the favor…!”

“It talked!? In Japanese!?”

The wolf talked in perfect sentences. It only opened its mouth, but it was able to produce the same words humans can.

“GRR… AROOOOOOO!!!”

The wolf gave Itsuki no time to recover from his surprise. It let out a thunderous howl and suddenly multiple wolves appeared behind the half-moon wolf. They appeared out of thin air. Every single wolf it summoned looked the same, making it easy to differentiate which are the clones and which is the real one, but those very wolves looked the same as the wolves he saw earlier.

“I see now… Calling for some fake friends, huh? No matter how many you summon, I’ll destroy them to smithereens!”

Then, the wolf howled again, but this time, dark circular ripples traveled through the air and passed through Itsuki. The very moment that the first ripple passed him; his vision darkened. It was just like what happened to him earlier. He could only see a certain distance.

“This won’t work on me!”

He immediately activated his perception field and waited for any movement. There was only silence. He could only think that the wolves were positioning themselves in a way that would be hard for him to counter even if they were detected 5-meters away, but he was wrong.

“What the—!?”

The ground below him turned to white and he was lifted off the ground. He could feel the intense wind coming from the ground, keeping him afloat at the exact center of the white circle below him. He tried to move out the center by flapping his limbs around like he was swimming but the wind was keeping him from moving away from that very location.

“Grrr… I would usually let my prey loose and hunt them down, but you aren’t prey, you’re rotten scum that deserves to be wiped out! AROOOOO!!!”

He heard the voice of the wolf from beyond the shadows. Angry and seething with rage. Not a moment later, wolves shot out from the shadows at lightning speed and attacked him. They bared their fangs, bit him all over, and dug their sharp claws into his barrier. Some of them attacked and fell off but most of them got a grip on his body and mauled him. Itsuki struggled to shake them off. He spun around in the air and beat up the ones he could reach.

Then, from the shadows came a blur of white and black. He couldn’t make up what it was, but it was probably the half-moon wolf. He felt the wolf try to bite into his neck but was unsuccessful. It then used air footholds to get above him and kicked him down towards the ground and so did the other wolves.

It was all a blur. The constant spinning and the relentless attacks from the wolves made it so that Itsuki could barely comprehend what was happening around him. His surroundings were complete darkness which made it hard to tell left from right, but when he was falling towards the ground. He saw a steady body of white. He regained his sight and sense of direction again, but that only added to the fear that was about to strike him.

From within the white circle came a gigantic head of a wolf, pale white with pitch-black eyes. It appeared out of the ground and swallowed him in its open mouth, revealing its razor-sharp fangs. The wolf devoured him whole and closed its mouth with a thunderous crack as the magic collapsed on him.

“K-Kgh…! Haahhh… Haahhh…”

He was left floating in mid-air, still alive from the wolves’ brutal assault. His skin wasn’t damaged one bit. That was because of the sturdy barrier that he had around him, but he was panting, his breath out of control. Although his barrier managed to take on all of the damage, it took him all of his strength to bear against the horror he faced. He was mentally exhausted since a hunter’s mental state is an important factor that allows them to use their spirit power.

Itsuki could only catch his breath and try to regenerate his energy and barrier. He couldn’t move and knew it was wise not to despite the dangers around him. Growling came from the shadows. Multiple wolves showed their faces and circled around him at the edge of the darkness. The head of the half-moon wolf appeared, but it was different. Earlier, it was mostly covered in black fur, but now only one side was black fur while the other was white. Something seemed to be running through its fur since it was standing up and flowing like a strong wind was blowing through it. It glared at him with its sharp eyes.

“How irksome. You’re still alive. Clinging to life with all you have… Grr… AROOO!!!!”

The half-moon wolf howled another time and the others followed. Dark circles rippled through the air coming from all the wolves and wrapped him in it. Itsuki could feel it. His ears were being broken, reducing all of the sounds he could perceive to only blank ringing. He could feel his body weakening and his eyes spinning around in confusion. He could barely function.

“Now, I’ll rid you from this world like the vermin you are!! AROOO!!!!”

The wolves began their attack. Numerous wolves launched at him with their claws and fangs. They used all of their strength to break through his barrier. Although he could barely see anything, he still spun around in mid-air and tried to dodge and shake off the wolves. It was apparent that he was dodging the correct direction to avoid some of the wolves, but he still got hit, and eventually, all of the wolves successfully clung to him. He was too slow. Whether it was the wolves’ speed, his body weakening, or a mix of both, he got mauled no matter what.

He got hit, but he was dodging the right way despite his weakened state. That was because of his perception field. It was able to sense anything from 5 meters away, but that didn’t mean it enhanced all his senses. Itsuki’s perception field only uses a spirit power like a radar, even with his hearing dulled, and eyes ablur, he could still use his perception field to sense his enemies, but that didn’t make up for the fact that his senses were severely impaired.

*\*Crack… Shatter!\**

The sound of shattering glass heralded the moment Itsuki feared. The wolves successfully broke his barrier and exposed his bare skin. They pressed their attack, biting and scratching him all over. He kept rolling around the air in an attempt to shake the wolves off. He didn’t bother to use arms to punch or legs to kick, instead, he spun around while breathing deeply to regain energy. Despite his skin getting pierced and torn in half, he gritted his teeth and took the damage. He kept calm. This wouldn’t have been able to do this if it weren’t for his harsh training.

*“\*D-Damn it! Wait till I get my energy back! With Transcendence I’ll—\*”*

*“\*From now on, you are forbidden from using Transcendence. Make use of your own power. Use your head. You can’t keep relying on brute force and overwhelming power forever. I won’t say anything if you need it to survive, but if you really want to become strong… Then stop cowering behind overwhelming power!\*”*

Just before Itsuki used transcendence, Kosuke’s voice echoed through his head yet again. It was another one of his sermons that struck something deep inside him. Like he was reading a manual about how Itsuki functioned, he said the right words for it to be engraved in his very soul.

“Haahh…”

He took another deep breath and calmed himself. The wolves kicked him towards the ground and fled. He knew exactly what was going to happen next. The ground below him covered in white began to distort, and a wolf’s head began to rise. Itsuki pulled back his fist and stared directly at the fearsome beast below him. He used the gathered air from his breath to release a loud roar of his own.

“…FUCK YOUUUUUUU!!!!!!!!”

He launched his fist towards the giant wolf. The moment he outstretched his arm came an explosion and a large figure of a blue fist shooting into the wolf’s mouth, prying it open as it penetrated its throat. Another explosion followed the moment they made contact. The fist took on the wolf head-on and stopped its approach, ultimately canceling out the magic that the wolf used.

“GRR… AROOO!!!!!”

Immediately after seeing its magic countered, the half-moon wolf let out another bloodcurdling howl. More dark ripples traveled through the air, Itsuki felt his body getting weaker, it was adding to the current effects he was already under and crippled him even more, but that didn’t end there.

From within the shadows appeared two fearsome white eyes and stretched out two paws with razor-sharp claws hurling straight towards Itsuki. With the help of his perception field, he managed to put his hands up to defend himself at the right places.

“GAHH…!”

Blue arms manifested and covered his own to strengthen his defense. It was kindled spirit power, similar to what he used to launch a fist into the wolf’s mouth. He managed to block one of the claws, but the other broke through and left a large scratch on his arms.

Itsuki was already getting tired, but he sensed multiple wolves launching at him once more. Their attack was relentless. The half-moon wolf wasn’t letting him have any time to rest. He felt this, but instead of trying to save his breath, he used it to let out a hair-raising roar.

“WRRAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!”

Something within Itsuki clicked as he let out his shout. It was like a heavy weight was lifted off his chest. The sickening cripple he had was lifted, in fact, he felt even better. It felt like the energy was back inside of him. That very moment, he spun around, not to shake off the incoming wolves, but to intercept them.

He grabbed hold of the snouts of two wolves and crushed them with his vice grip, reducing them into nothing as the illusions disappeared. While the other wolves were able to latch onto him with their fangs and claws, he pincered the wolf on his stomach with his knee and elbow, entered a backflip, crouched in mid-air to reach the wolf hanging on his heel and crushed its head, followed by slamming both of his fists behind his back to rid of the wolf clinging with its claws.

“AROOOO!!!!”

Not a moment later, another pair of paws appeared from the shadows, but this time Itsuki was prepared and blocked both paws with a barrier.

“AROOOO!!!!”

Itsuki sensed it. This was the final attack. Another pack of wolves came from the sides, but that wasn’t all, the white circle below him began to distort and white eyes appeared in the darkness, a forewarning to the approach of the gigantic wolf head and the large claws. It was an all-out attack.

But he didn’t panic. A grin appeared on his face, a deep contrast to his perilous situation. While he was floating parallel to the ground with his face towards it, he suddenly spun himself upright, summoned air footholds directly behind his feet, and used flash strike directly above him. He turned his grin to grit as he performed all of that in less than half a second. He pulled back his arm and shouted his heart out as he launched upwards and released a deadly punch directly inside the half-moon wolf’s mouth, opening it so wide that one would have thought it would break its snout. The wolf made a sharp cry as the force of Itsuki’s fist crawled throughout its body. The wolves stubbornly clinging to him, the giant head, claws, the white ground, and the darkness all disappeared the moment his fist made contact.

This was a part of his plan. He purposely focused his attention on the ground and his sides, purposefully avoiding looking above him. He made it look like he was too focused on everything else, creating a fake opening above him so that if the half-moon wolf ever attacked, it would most likely be from above.

Itsuki and the half-moon wolf fell to the ground. The forest came into view and the sea of flames that were burning the trees to ashes were still beside them. He laid on the ground with ragged breath, profuse sweating, multiple scratches, bite marks, and blood flowing out those very wounds. He was a mess. If anyone saw him, they would no doubt expect him to die from blood loss, but that didn’t concern Itsuki. It took him about three minutes before forcing himself to stand up with his wounds sealed. He didn’t use medical equipment but instead forced his blood to coagulate and seal his wounds using spirit power in exchange for platelets. He looked around and saw the half-moon wolf unconscious on the ground right by a tree. He slowly made his way towards it, bearing the pain he was experiencing.

“Time to finish this…”

Just before he reached it, however, came another wolf. It was one of its clones. It was growling to try and intimidate him. But that didn’t work, Itsuki just walked closer like the wolf wasn’t there. But then…

“GRR!! GRARRR…!”

“…Huh?”

The wolf pounced at him. He retaliated by throwing a punch at it, but he pulled back at the last second, neutralizing the force and letting the wolf bite into his fist, but it didn’t hurt. In the time he was lying on the ground, he regained enough energy to produce a strong barrier and a single wolf definitely wasn’t enough to destroy it. Itsuki stopped moving upon realizing something.

“… It's breathing. It’s… real!”

The wolf was breathing. Unlike the clones he fought earlier, they didn’t breathe. They were just illusions that served to fight on behalf of the half-moon wolf’s will. The wolf that was biting on his fist, however, was breathing. It could only mean one thing, that this wolf wasn’t produced by the half-moon wolf, nor was it from another world. It was just a normal, living, breathing, grey wolf with no special skills whatsoever.

“No way…”

Noticing that it was useless, the wolf unlatched its mouth on Itsuki’s fist and returned to intimidating him with the knocked-out half-moon wolf behind it. This very moment reminded him of a similar time. The weak protecting the strong, standing up to a fearsome opponent that was beyond their power to handle, just to protect what was important to them. He could never forget that moment in his life.

He stood there facing the wolf, staring at its eyes silently for a few seconds. He racked his head, trying to understand the situation before him. Then, a loud crash in the distance caught his attention. It was a tree branch that gave out and fell from the forest fire. He then realized what chain of events led to this very situation.

He walked away from the wolf and headed towards the forest fire. Despite the long pause since the last time he was strengthening trees, the forest fire hadn’t gotten too out of control. It spread more which meant that he had to strengthen a few more trees but it was still within his ability to encase the fire. He was exhausted, but he still had spirit power and energy left in him.

He strengthened all the trees and successfully trapped the fire. If he had to make a rough assumption, his spirit power was around 40%. Although his fight with the half-moon wolf was intense, he didn’t use as much spirit power as he first imagined. He was just incredibly tired.

Itsuki picked up the flashlight he dropped on the ground and walked away, he stopped and thought of looking back to the wolves, but he shook his head and continued walking back to his tent.

“That wolf… It attacked me because it thought I caused the forest fire. That little shit… if it stopped and thought for a moment then it wouldn’t have to be like this…”

*“\*Your mission is to find the rumored half-moon wolf.\*”*

*“\*Do try to not be a bother.\*”*

He remembered the very words Kosuke used to give him his mission. This was followed by the time earlier that day when he chased after the grey wolf. Back then, he didn’t see any dark ripples come out its mouth, along this is the fact that he sensed it breathe.

“…You meant to not be a bother to the wolves, not the hunters that sent me here, huh?”

If he thought about his mission first, he would have realized that the mission was to judge whether or not he should even get rid of the half-moon wolf in the first place. If he hadn’t tried to chase down the wolf earlier that afternoon, then he would not have been such a bad figure to the wolves. Since the half-moon wolf could actually conversate, then maybe it would’ve tried to talk instead.

“…The rumors go back to a year ago. That old man… they would’ve gotten rid of that thing much earlier if it was actually a threat! He set me up!”

The only information Itsuki was given was rumors of howling and sightings. If they ignored the fact that it came from Zerid, there were no reports of attacks or anything that would have gotten the attention of the clan. He sent Itsuki on a mission to use his head more, not to get rid of a wolf, if he failed to realize that, then this fight was his punishment.

Itsuki clicked his tongue as he quietly continued walking with an annoyed expression on his face, but that expression quickly changed the moment he arrived by the lake.

“What the…”

His tent was burnt down. He could see the tent’s poles remain standing while the rest was burned to ashes. His face paled as he was thrown into a panic, so much that he used flash strike to quickly get to the tent. He dug through the ashes trying to find something.

“There it is!”

He felt something solid through the remnants and pulled it out. It was his bag that contained all of his belongings. It had soot all over it, much like Itsuki, but there were no holes or anything that might expose its contents. He opened the bag.

“It’s safe! My lunch box is safe! Phew, Ichika would’ve killed me if I went home with this thing damaged. I already went through it once, never again.”

Instead of worrying about who could have burnt his tent down, he first worried about the safety of his lunch box. In the past, he received a scolding from his sister when he accidentally broke his lunch box by using it as a weapon. It ended terribly for him. With his primary concerns out of the way, he returned to reality.

“Now, who the hell did this!? Is there another monster I don’t know about!? Whatever it is, it's strong enough to burn the special equipment the old man gave me.”

The tent as well as his bag was made out of special equipment from the Konjou clan. It’s made to resist simple fires and magic. Of course, there was a limit to what it could resist, but seeing as the whole tent was burnt down, there was no chance any normal human could do this. He figured whatever did this to his tent was the same creature that started the forest fire.

“I better find that thing. I can’t leave if something like that is on the loose—O-Ow…”

Just as he was about to head out into the woods again, he felt a sharp pain from all over his body. Although he was able to stop his bleeding using spirit power, wounds and bruises still existed all over his body. It couldn’t heal wounds and injuries the same way magic can. He walked over to the rock he sat on before, opened his bag, and took out the medical kit to treat his wounds.

“Didn’t think I’ll actually be using this… Tch, I feel like I lost somehow.”

**…………**

Earlier that day, around the afternoon, when Itsuki was still scouting the area of his camp. Kosuke was sitting on a bench in the residential area. He was sipping on a hot cup of green tea while watching the people of the Konjou clan go about their everyday lives.

“Hm? Good afternoon, Sakurai-ojii-san. I didn’t think I’d see you here.”

“Oh, good afternoon. I should be the one saying that to you, Shimizu-dono.”

The person who greeted Kosuke was none other than Shimizu Yoshiko, the person who served as the fourth judge at the battle royale.

“It seems like you’re slacking on work a bit, aren’t you, Sakurai-ojii-san?”

“I have finished all of my work, which is why I’m resting. I do not want to hear that from the same person that was late for her first training session with her very first student.”

“Grk… So you knew…”

“I have eyes everywhere.”

“Transcendence is that useful, huh? Well, how is your training with that Watanabe kid? I didn’t think he’d last a day when I heard you were his mentor. I even heard that you made him go through your brutal personality test. Someone had to go fix the stairs the day after it took quite the work to get that done quickly.”

“Hm…”

Kosuke took a sip of green tea before responding to her.

“He has potential. It would not be strange if he manages to become the strongest brute of the clan someday.”

“Oh? That’s reassuring, especially since it's coming from you. I barely hear you praising anyone. I guess you’ve made a lot of progress in your training.”

“Hm? As a brute, he’s barely made any. He’s still at the third level of the hundred-level training dungeon.”

“What!? You’re kidding me. That kid that wiped out a horde of our trained hunters all by himself?”

“That was not skill. That was a beast using everything he had to survive.”

“What do you mean?”

“In his fight, he already lost as a brute. He tried to use raw power to scare off his enemies. My student was not anything more than a school bully with immense raw strength. He tried to scare off actual fighters with a mysterious skill they have never fought against. It worked until our hunters caught up to what he was doing. In all honesty, a single hunter could have taken him down if it were not for the transcendence Ryosei taught him.”

“Aren’t you just being cold again? Then, how did he win that fight?”

“…Halfway into the fight, he changed. He was driven into a corner leaving him with only one choice—to fight. Before, he was only cowering behind his power, but at that moment, I saw he had something none of the other hunters possessed. Incredible combat and primal instinct as well as overwhelming resolve and desire.”

“What do you mean? All of our hunters have that.”

“Would all of our hunters be able to teach themselves Plunder, Perception Field, Unbreakable, and consistent flash strike attacks in the middle of battle?”

“H-Huh? Are you telling me he didn’t know those skills beforehand!? What was Dai doing this whole time?”

“I talked with Yamazaki-dono after the battle. He said he was never taught those skills because he had even bigger problems. At the time, he had a bad habit of fighting without using his head. As a hunter yourself, you must know the dangers.”

Yoshiko nodded in agreement.

“Even Ryosei said the same. He had a difficult time with him in group practices, but apparently, he never noticed him use those skills. Except for flash strike tactics, those skills are part of the most valuable skills that make brutes what they are, and that person unconsciously taught themselves those skills in order to survive. Not only that, but he also incorporated them into his barbaric fighting style. His unorthodox style is what brought him victory.”

“I see. Then, with you sending him out to his very first mission, I guess it’s safe to say you managed to fix that.”

“For the most part. This mission of his will be the true test. Whether or not he has learned his lesson will completely depend on this. He is up against two otherworldly creatures. It’s up to him to figure out the real enemy.”

“What? Are you sure he’ll be alright?”

“I taught him how to think, how to treat wounds, how to fight, and all the basic skills of a brute aside from Unbreakable. Although he won’t be able to use plunder, if he is as talented as I think he is, he will be able to teach himself unbreakable again to survive. If not, then he will simply use transcendence and fail.”

Yoshiko recalled the function of the skill Unbreakable. It makes spirit power run across your body and increase their tenacity and resistance. It is used to reduce or remove negative effects on the body. It is directly connected to the soul. This means unbreakable’s effectiveness is highly dependent on the person’s willpower.

A smirk showed in Kosuke’s face just before he took another sip of his tea.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I just realized how unlikely it is for him to fail.”

“Why is that?”

“He was the first person to ever finish the first level in the dark without using Espy. Instead, he used it to learn preception field.”

“H-He’s quite the character, isn’t he?”

“He is ill-mannered and complained a lot, but it wasn’t too hard to fix those, to a satisfactory level at least. In the end, he is a straightforward and earnest kid who was blinded by the definition of power, and I know he is the kind of kid that can overcome a test like this.”

**…………**

“It’s so fucking cold! Who the hell was the shithead that designed these things!?”

Itsuki shouted into the night while he was walking alone in the forest. He had his bag holstered on one of his shoulders and several bandages all over his body. Right now, he was in the dead of night at Hokkaido, the northmost of Japan, with only a Gi on his person, but he only had himself to blame.

“I can’t believe I didn’t put my clothes in the bag!”

Back when he changed into his Gi, he left the clothes on the floor which resulted in them getting burnt to a crisp along with the tent.

“Geez…”

Itsuki made it to one of the highest places in the area. He could see the forest fire had already died down. There was only a small amount of smoke in the distance but no fire. He continued to scout the area, looking for something that might be a sign of the other creature that caused tonight’s fires. There didn’t seem to be anything around until…

“AROOOO!!!”

“Huh?”

He heard a distant howl. It was the same howl he kept hearing in his battle earlier.

“AROOOO!!!”

“…”

It was the half-moon wolf. It kept howling from over the distance. He noticed the wolf always howled before an attack, perhaps that was how they cast their magic. If that was the case, then it could only mean it was fighting something this very moment.

Itsuki didn’t waste any more time and sprinted towards the howling. It kept getting louder and louder as he cleared the forest. The howls lasted for about three minutes before abruptly stopping. He picked up the pace. He finally caught up to the enemy’s plans. He was being used. The forest fire, the fight with the half-moon wolf, burning down his tent, and the repeated howls from over the distance. It was all a plan to catch the half-moon wolf weakened and off guard. It used Itsuki as its pawns and burnt his tent in an attempt to chase him out of the forest the moment his usefulness was all used up. Realizing this made his blood boil.

He stopped by a river. Now with the howls gone, he wasn’t sure what other clues he can use to find the wolf. He searched the area, looking for signs of struggle. His eyes widened when he found a sure-fire clue.

“Hey! Over there!”

Itsuki shouted and ran over to someone, specifically, a wolf, the same one that stood between him and the half-moon wolf earlier. The wolf entered an aggressive stance, baring its fangs and growling intimidatingly. He made sure to keep his distance to not provoke it.

“Calm down, I’m here to save your friend! You were with him, right? You should know!”

He couldn’t believe what he was doing. He was trying to talk to a normal wolf using real words to communicate with it. From an outsider’s perspective, he must’ve looked crazy, but that wasn’t the time for him to think of those things.

“I-I… Here… Save… You’re… Friend!”

He tried his hardest by breaking his sentences and acting words out but to no response. The situation looked bleak and Itsuki was ready to go off to find more clues, but just before he did so, the wolf barked at him a few times. It might have been trying to say something, but there was no way Itsuki would understand. Then, the wolf left.

“Wh—!? Hey!”

The wolf stopped to look back at him. It stared at him and barked twice, followed by moving forward a few steps and looking back at him. It then struck him that the wolf was trying to make him follow it.

“Hell yeah, I got through!”

He celebrated by himself and followed the wolf. They traveled by the river and followed it upstream. After a few minutes, they arrived at a cave where the source of the river came from. The wolf barked into the cave, telling him that the half-moon wolf and its abductor were inside there.

Itsuki walked in but the wolf didn’t seem to want to follow. It was understandable. Its instincts were probably screaming at it, telling it would die if it dared to step any further in. That was no wonder as whatever took the half-moon wolf had enough power to take it on. Even if it were injured, the half-moon wolf would still be quite difficult to take on. After all, it didn’t need to move to attack or defend. So he left the wolf behind and set his focus directly in front of him.

He arrived at a spacious opening. It had huge rocks and boulders around the area and a large lake in the middle which was the source of the river. It was more open than he thought a cave would be. He scanned the cave and saw the half-moon wolf knocked out next to a wall, and something else right beside it.

“Is that… an eye?”

A purple eye was hovering just beside the wolf. It was staring straight at him like it was expecting him to come. A voice echoed through the cave welcoming Itsuki of his arrival.

“I see you have come. I cannot fathom why you willingly walked into your death.”

“You think you can kill me? Why don’t I show you which one of us will actually die?”

Itsuki dropped his bag and rushed the eye. He could feel his wounds hurting every time he moved abruptly, but luckily, he didn’t need to worry about his bleeding since he stopped it using spirit power. He used flash strike to close the final distance as a surprise attack and was about to drive his fist into the eye. But suddenly, he used flash strike to jump backward. A purple laser shot through the location he was standing on earlier.

Itsuki turned to its source and saw another eye floating in the air. Then, another laser came from behind him. He dodged it with flash strike but got hit by another laser from the side. The force knocked him back but he managed to land on his feet.

“I have you all figured out. I watched you, watched you, and watched you. I know, spirit power, omnidirectional sensory, supersonic dashes, empowered defenses, and incredible resistances; a chantless close range skillset. I see that you are strong and swift, but you have no chance of winning if you cannot destroy all of me at once!”

Multiple eyes appeared from behind rocks and small crevices. They surrounded him, riddling the cave with purple squinting monsters. There were too many to keep track of, all that Itsuki knows is that he’s trapped. The eyes began to glow, alerting him of their lasers.

He waited for them to shoot and use flash strike to dodge it, but something felt off. Out of all of the eyes around him, only one was shooting at him. Right when the laser was about to hit him, rolled sideways instead. A laser hit the ground he was standing on and multiple others shot in a circle around him.

“Tch! What a pain in the ass!”

The eyes shot 10 meters around where he was previously standing. It was the max range of his flash strike. Although other hunters can cover a longer distance, right now, 10 meters was his limit. The enemy tried to intercept him.

Itsuki decided to save flash strike for later and ran towards the nearest eye around him. He ran strangely, turning left and right. Without the use of flash strike, he only had less than a second to react and get out of the way if they shot another laser. Instead of escaping, he hoped to mess up their aim by making faints.

“I see you.”

“Kgh!”

But even that didn’t work. His barrier successfully blocked the laser, but he couldn’t afford to take unnecessary hits. Since his barrier was still weak from the earlier battle, it would only take two more hits before it broke.

He picked himself up and continued running straight towards the eye, tossing away his zigzag tactic. It glowed, signaling it was about to shoot. The very second it shot the laser, he used flash strike to drive under it and reached it with his punch. It stopped spewing the laser when he destroyed it, but it didn’t end there. An eye appeared behind him, glowing as it did, it was about to shoot a laser at point-blank range into his back.

“Pesky eyes!”

Itsuki thrust his elbow at it. He noticed it with perception field the moment it appeared and immediately pulled back his extended arm. Another one appeared at the edge of his field 5 meters above him, readying its laser, but instead of chasing after it, he jumped backward to dodge it. The eye missed its laser, and along with that came multiple lasers surrounded that blast, leaving no room for anything to be near it. If Itsuki chased after it, he would’ve been bombarded with those lasers, piercing not only his barrier but his body as well. He was safe, but now he was at a loss for what to do. He continued running to escape the next barrage of lasers and racked his brain as he ran.

*“\*Think, think! They told me something about this! I know it! I need to remember!\*”*

He searched the area as he ran, searching for anything that might help him remember the information he needed.

*“\*Rocks… water… moss… lasers… eyes… eyes… eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes! Why are there so many eyes!? How does this thing even work if it only has eyes?! …Ah!\*”*

Itsuki remembered. That day he and Senkyo were taught about the creatures that lived in Zerid. Their bodies adapted to their environment of mana and magic. They can not only use spells, but also use their body to enhance them, reduce casting time, and do many other things depending on their species.

*“\*Bodies! It's trying to trick me! I don’t need to destroy all these eyes; I just need to find its body somewhere! Kgh—!\*”*

He rolled to the side to dodge the incoming laser he sensed and changed his course to the closest obstacle he could find. It was a huge boulder, without a second thought, he wrapped his hand in spirit power and drove his fist into it. The rock cracked, but it didn’t break so he followed it up with another punch.

“Not here.”

He demolished the huge rock in two punches but his target wasn’t there. He picked up two medium-sized rocks that could fit his palm and ran to the next boulder. He threw the rocks at the lasers but only to be penetrated, creating a clean circle where the laser pierced it and resumed their pursuit on him. He dodged to the side and avoided it.

“It works.”

After reaching the boulder, he scanned the area and saw a few glowing eyes, so he hid behind the boulder. There were still eyes around him, so there was no real point in hiding but that wasn’t his goal. He readied his legs, looking like he was about to use flash strike. Multiple lasers pierced through the rock, all intersecting to one spot, on his very location. Meanwhile, more lasers were shot 10 meters around him. Completely relying on perception field, he closed his eyes and waited for the very moment the lasers closed in and entered a backflip, dodging the lasers and returning to his original position.

“TAKE THIS!”

Itsuki took a deep breath, wrapped his arms in spirit power, and punched into the one hole that all the lasers intersected to. Suddenly, a beam of blue light blasted through all of the holes created by the enemy’s lasers, much like a disco light, and shot down all the eyes that shot through the boulder. Along with the eyes, the boulder crumbled after the attack, revealing nothing but the other side of the cave. Seeing that his target wasn’t there, he ran to the next boulder.

“I see you are very interesting. I calculated that you would be gone in a minute. I was wrong. I underestimated you, human, however… I know your resistance is futile.”

“Oh, shut it!”

Itsuki continued to destroy boulder after boulder, clearing any possible hiding spot, but the moment he demolished the last one, he ended up with nothing. The eyes that he destroyed only revived, and the cave was clear of any hiding spots.

“I told you. I noticed you saw through my lie. I never thought a lower species like you would possess such knowledge, however… I am far more superior! I am not even inside the cave you are in! I consider this unfortunate that I cannot observe you any longer, but I must now return to my master—”

“SHUT IIIIT!!”

Itsuki roared and made his way to the half-moon wolf. Multiple eyes gathered in front of it and made a purple barrier. He wrapped his arm with spirit power and used flash strike to bust his way in, but it was too strong. He was knocked back by the force of his strike but caught himself with his feet and threw a volley of punches into the barrier. It began to crack.

“GET OUT OF MY WAAAAY!!!”

He was standing still as he threw his punches. Of course, the enemy wasn’t about to let this chance slip past. Multiple eyes charged up and fired lasers at him. He sensed he was surrounded. With no escape from the sides, he used flash strike to go upwards. He sensed more coming for him so he created air footholds to launch himself backward. Having sure he was safe, a grin showed on his face…

“Hehe! I got you—”

But only to be destroyed the moment he saw the state of the barrier.

“What!?”

He planned on using the lasers against his enemy by making him shoot their own lasers directly at the barrier, but contrary to his expectations, the barrier was never better. The cracks that he managed to inflict on it were completely sealed. He was sure he dodge the lasers on the last possible second, so they had to have hit the barrier. But why was it fixed instead of destroyed? That was the question that plagued his mind, and his enemy took the liberty of relieving him of that.

“I told you before. I see what you’re doing. I noticed that you are missing critical information. I cast magic with my own mana, it cannot damage me or my own magic. I detect you are in pain after seeing my attack reinforce the barrier that you were trying to destroy… I told you before; it is futile.”

Itsuki grit his teeth in frustration. Repeating the same actions won’t break the barrier, it will only drain the little amount of spirit power he had left. He felt that he had about 22% left. Destroying all of the obstacles and taking out the eyes cost him a lot. He had to finish this quick. Something that doesn’t require spirit power. It was then that it hit him. The sudden realization of his key to victory. He turned around and headed for the cave exit.

“I see you have realized your weakness; however, I will not allow you to escape.”

Multiple eyes appeared in front of the exit and lit up, ready to intercept him. But before they could launch their barrage, he used flash repeatedly, grabbed his bag off the floor, and quickly avoided the lasers by using flash strike to the side.

He took it with him and ran as fast as he could to the barrier. Since most of the eyes were grouped up at the exit, there weren’t as many eyes to defend the barrier. He swerved around to dodge the lasers using perception field to detect them and made it back in front of the barrier.

He could see the eyes from beyond the barrier. They were the ones that kept the barrier standing. If only he had a way to take the eyes out, he would have no need to destroy the barrier, so he took out from his bag his greatest weapon. The hunting flashlight.

“HAVE A TASTE OF MY GREATEST WEAPON YOU DISGUSTING EYEBALL!!”

He turned on the flashlight on its most concentrated setting and pointed it at one of the eyeballs. It felt the burning pain of the light in less than a second. The reason the light was able to pass through the barrier was that it wasn’t magical or physical. If light wasn’t allowed to cross through the barrier, then Itsuki wouldn’t have been able to see what was inside of it. It was the first-ever time in his life he was overjoyed he listened to science class.

“GAAAAAAAHH!!!!”

His enemy screamed in pain and all of the eyeballs around him disappeared. The barrier was down and there were no other shooters. He could pick up the half-moon wolf and escape that very moment, but now wasn’t the time.

Instead, he ran past it and used flash strike into the wall. A pair of razor-sharp serrated blades appeared from the wall and tried to pincer his neck like a pair of scissors, but it was too slow. Before the blades even appeared through the wall, Itsuki had already steered clear of it and dashed through the wall. He was long gone. What the blades were about to hit was only an afterimage from his quick transition to a flash strike.

From behind the wall was a small cubbyhole, but it was actually just an extension of the cave that was covered by an illusion. Inside that tight space was Itsuki with his arm charged all the way back and hurled it towards the head of purple abomination in front of him. The force of his punch was so powerful that it sent it flying across the cave.

“Heh, you were about 5 meters too close!”

Back when he first tried to destroy the barrier to release the half-moon wolf, his perception field picked up on mumbling from across the wall just before lasers were shot at him. The enemy’s chanting exposed his position. After looking for so long, it just hid behind the hostage this whole time.

It rolled on the ground until it was brought to a stop by the rough ground scraping its body, but its suffering was yet to end. Itsuki used the force from his flash strike to smash it underfoot further into the ground. Just as he was about to pummel it with his fists, he sensed a laser coming at him from the side and stepped back to evade it. In turn, the enemy picked himself back up.

“I-I miscalculated… I neglected to consider my positioning…!”

Itsuki watched his enemy from afar, deciding on his next move. His enemy was clad in purple skin. Its head looked like an insect’s pincers with an opening inside it seemed to be its mouth. It had four arms, two smaller ones and two larger ones with sawblades, three crab-like legs, and a huge purple eye embedded at the center of its body. Just before it managed to fully recover, he used flash strike and kicked it back.

“Well too bad!”

The enemy slid back but managed to stay standing. It saw Itsuki following up his attack with his fist so it used its razor-sharp sawblades to intercept it. Suddenly, he stopped his punch in mid-air, but in exchange, a large fist came hurling at it. The enemy intercepted it with one of its razor-sharp blades and saved the other for when Itsuki decided to use it as an opening.

“!?”

It was a smart move. Unfortunately for it, Itsuki’s kindled fist was much more powerful than it expected. It tried to disable it by directly attacking the kindled fist with its other serrated arm, but it was too slow. The moment it tried that, Itsuki was already under his own kindled fist and threw a punch directly at its exposed eye. It stepped back to dodge but only to be overwhelmed by his kindled fist and knocked back.

Taking advantage of this opening, Itsuki followed it up by intercepting the trajectory of its landing with his fist and launched it back yet another time. Just before it left the air, Itsuki continued his relentless attacks by ax kicking his enemy into the ground followed by another series of punches.

No blood came out of it, but instead, its skin cracked, showing it was reaching its limit. Taking a few more attacks meant its end. Multiple lasers shot at him, but it was easily evaded by his flash strike. The lasers didn’t shoot as accurately as before. They spread all over the general area Itsuki was standing instead of intersecting at one point. It was clear his enemy was in a panic.

“I’ll finish you—”

*\*Thud…!\**

Both Itsuki and the enemy’s attention was caught by the sudden thud on the ground. It was the flashlight that he strapped to the belt of his Gi. He squeezed it in there tightly, but all the moving around loosened it up, and his last flash strike was its limit. He tried to retrieve it back with flash strike, but the enemy’s laser was faster and reduced it to ashes.

“I-I… I…!”

A large mass of purple eyes appeared in mid-air and piled up like a barrier around his enemy. The massive accumulation of eyes then exploded and spread all across the room. They left behind a large barrier where his enemy stood in the middle. He could hear it struggling to speak but the echo throughout the cave delivered his messages to him.

“…I-I-I-I made t-too many miscalculations! I w-will grant you the honor of showing my true power! I will bring upon you a fitting end!”

Before, it mumbled its spells, but now it didn’t even bother to hide that it was about to cast something.

“O darkness, let this be the prelude to the catastrophe, shape me as your herald, and lend me the power to bring upon judgment. Darkness in the sky is His forewarning…”

An eye appeared at a corner of the cave. Itsuki didn’t know what was happening but he didn’t like it.

“Roaring thunder signals its arrival…”

Another eye appeared at another corner. He reached the bottom of the first eye and shot a kindled fist at it, but it was intercepted by a barrage of lasers from the eyes around the cave.

“The fleeing is but a futile attempt to escape the inevitable…”

A third eye appeared. He used consecutive flash strikes but he was intercepted by the same lasers. He managed to dodge it by creating air footholds, but he never reached the eyes. Whatever those they were, they are clearly important.

“And the hapless bunch that receives its judgment are the fools who dared awaken the Devil! Eye of the Storm!”

Another eye appeared. At that moment, the entirety of the cave was filled with a dark fog. They sparked with purple lighting hitting anything inside the fog much like a thunderstorm in the clouds. Itsuki was no exception. He couldn’t move a muscle and he could feel the electricity coursing through his body and the fog assailing his breathing.

“Th-This…“

“I commend you for driving me to this point. I really do, but… I will now bring you death!”

The fog became thicker and lightning strikes even stronger. The loud crackling of thunder could be heard as lightning struck the cave. Then, all the eyes that spread through the cave glowed in purple light. Similar to a light show, constant beams of purple lasers shot through the cave, all of them moving around in a coordinated motion so that every inch of the cave was shot by the lasers, flattening the surface all the while. As if that wasn’t enough, the eye at the center of the creature glowed in the same light. It seemed to be charging its attack. One so intense that purple lightning began dancing over its surface. Having reached its peak power, the eye released a gigantic purple laser, deadlier than any laser it ever shot. All the other eyes shot their small lasers and all of them concentrated on one location, the area where Itsuki was standing. The power was so immense that instead of digging the wall out, the laser pierced through the whole cave and lit up the sky.

The fog slowly cleared up and all of the purple eyes scattered around the cave disappeared, only its barrier remained. It stayed inside its protection, panting heavily for air. The eye in its center produced smoke from its intense all-out attack. Normally, magic isn’t produced directly from the body, but this creature from Zerid could clearly use its body to empower its attacks.

“I-I… hahh… must be careful for now on… I gather that… hahh… beings of this world… are incredibly powerful—”

“Gee, thanks.”

*\*CRUSH!!\**

From behind the creature, Itsuki stood soaking wet with his arm gruesomely piercing its chest with his hands grasping its eye with a vice grip. With another crushing sound, he squeezed his hand and crushed the eye, leaving it no chance to respond to his surprise attack.

About a minute earlier, Itsuki was stunned by the incessant purple lightning striking his body and was being suffocated by the dark fog, continuous attacks both internal and external. However, that wasn’t enough to restrain him. He was able to break through using a brute skill that Kosuke never taught him. Unbreakable. The very same skill that released him from the effects of the half-moon wolf’s magic earlier.

His unbreakable will, stubbornness, and unwavering resolve caused him to move forward. However, every time he broke past, it didn’t take long for him to be stunned again, but that didn’t matter to him, he would only break free again and again. He gritted his teeth and let out his battle cry as he repeated the process of getting stunned and breaking free over and over again until it seemed like the magic became ineffective against him and made his way to the river close by.

Inside the water, he was completely free from the fog and lightning. When he opened his eyes, he saw there was a hole in the barrier that his enemy failed to notice. Its barrier was created and strengthened through connecting multiple of its floating eyeballs, but there weren’t any eyes placed under the water. He swam through the river and surfaced inside the barrier where the creature was blasting its enormous laser through the cave. He slowly approached it using poltergeist to silence the noise he was making and executed his assassination.

The creature was now an empty husk. It fell lifelessly to the ground with a thud. The creature began to disintegrate, slowly disappearing from this world, leaving its ashes for the wind to take away. It was just how creatures from Zerid died.

Itsuki left the body alone and made his way to the half-moon wolf. He was surprised. The wolf that had half-black and half-white fur when it was knocked out, currently had most of its fur white with small tinges of black and staring directly at him. It must have been how its body functioned with magic. It had wounds on its body and on one of its legs from its battle with the eye creature. It called out to him.

“You. Why did you come here?”

He responded to the wolf while making his way to his bag that was close by.

“A mission. I was sent to a useless sightseeing mission, that’s it.”

He opened his bag, took out bandages, and approached the wolf. It was wary of him and stepped back with a growl.

“What? You don’t want me to stop your bleeding?”

“What kind of sightseer can fight two consecutive battles with otherworldly creatures?!”

“How about you stop complaining and let me treat you. It’s getting annoying.”

“Stop it. I don’t need your help now that I’m conscious. I can heal these myself with my own magic.”

The wolf walked away from Itsuki and headed towards the exit. He got a bit irritated by its actions and yelled out to it.

“What? That’s it? I saved your life, you know?”

The wolf stopped on its tracks and stared back at him.

“I know. For that, you have my thanks. But that is no reason for me to suddenly be friendly with the same person that punched my guts out.”

The wolf kept walking away. With a click of his tongue, Itsuki picked up his bag and stored his bandages back. He was irritated by the wolf’s attitude, but it made a great point. In the first place, if he hadn’t acted rashly, he might have been able to avoid their whole fight.

He made it outside the cave and saw that it was dawn. It lit up the forest, making the trees create long shadows, peering its sunlight through its narrow openings. He was about to head out of the forest to look for somewhere to eat and pass his time before his flight back home but a familiar howl behind him took his attention. It was the half-moon wolf, as well as two grey wolves and a small cub around it.

“Don’t disregard my thanks. You can come back any time. I safeguard these forests, so you won’t have any trouble with its inhabitants. The name’s Enrel (エンレル), don’t forget it.”

The pack of wolves left him alone and disappeared into the trees. Itsuki watched as they left and faced back to the path out of the forest and walked away. In his mind replayed the words the wolf left him with.

“So you’re some kind of guardian, huh? Heh. Give me some time and I’ll be the same.”

He stared at the rising sun, imagining the future ahead of him.

“Wait…”

However, it was then that he realized the near-future had much more in store for him.

“I used consecutive flash strikes! Fuuuuck!”

In the heat of the battle, Itsuki forgot about the order to not use consecutive flash strikes. It was true that he needed to use them to live, so he didn’t regret using them. But he experienced first-hand how his mentor punished him for a mistake necessary or not. This situation was indeed different, but that only served to worsen the situation as he would have no idea what to expect once he returned. He could only look blankly at the sky and prepare for a storm much more frightening than the earlier monster.

**Chapter 4: Passage of Our Time**

“Who are you?”

A dark figure appeared in front of me. A round blob of black and purple with ominous red eyes, dark cinders emerging from its fiery head as if its own evil was burning it, standing at just the same level as my waist. It was similar to slimes you would find in games or any other fantasy entertainment media the 21st century produced. It responded to me in a shilling voice, making me even more uncomfortable.

“Me…? I am you, and you are me. You have gone far into the darkness. There’s no escaping it. It won’t be long now… your absolute end.”

“Huh…?”

I had no idea what it was saying at the time. I had just regained consciousness from that nightmare, after all. From those excruciating days of rampaging emotions that I tried to keep inside me. From those cursed days where I could barely keep a hold of myself. But to think… after waking up from that abhorrent nightmare… was only the beginning to an even worse reality. How cruel this world is.

“…”

I slowly opened my eyes only to see the same dark and gloomy surroundings come into view. A place where I was all alone with nothing but my mind to entertain me for most of the time. Then again, the word “entertain” was my way of sugar-coating reality with a utopian dream that would never come. A more appropriate word would be “torture.”

Here in the dark depths of the Konjou clan’s dungeons, behind the cold iron bars enhanced with spirit power to make them stronger than diamond and resistant to any magical attacks. I sit on top of cold, hard cement that was a sorry excuse for a bed with lifeless eyes as I’m tortured by my very own mind.

My name is Saito Touma, a traitor of the clan I once served, and a monster cured for a lifetime. This all began two weeks and two days ago. The very day I was placed in this cell, I saw a dark slime in my dream, one that I had never seen before. I asked it what it was and gave me an obscure answer along with a prelude to my doom. I didn’t understand it at the time, but now, it was probably describing this very day.

**…………**

I woke up that day to find that I was all alone in this dark cell. My memories were a blur. The last thing I could recall clearly was reading a file that Sora was reading. My memories after that were in fragments. It seems like I attacked Sora and Senkyo because I was angry about something, and after that, I tried to kill Senkyo another time but failed.

I shouted to get someone’s attention. A hunter I didn’t know responded to my call, but they immediately left the moment they saw it was me. I repeatedly called out as they left but they never turned to look back. A few minutes later, Sakurai-sama and Yukou-san appeared.

“Sa—”

*\*Sakurai-sama? Yukou-san? Since when did I start calling them that?\**

My words were stuck in my throat and I couldn’t do anything but stare at them intensely. They came up to the cell and greeted me.

“Good to see you’re awake, Touma-kun.”

“Sakurai-sama, what’s the meaning of this? Why am I here!?”

“I see, so you have no recollection of what happened. Well, I’ll let Ryosei here explain your situation. It would be best if he did it.”

“…Ryosei?”

*\*As I recall, Ryosei was the name I read from the file back at the library. He was the person that wielded Kuro Yaiba… that weapon…\**

“Nice to finally meet you, Touma. I may look like Senkyo right now, but I am Konjou Ryosei, the true wielder of the blade you tried to steal.”

“S-Steal!? I wouldn’t do something like that!”

“Is that so? I guess you weren’t conscious at that time. What was the last thing you remember?”

“I was at the library reading a file about Kuro Yaiba! After that, I can’t remember anything clearly. But I wouldn’t betray the clan to steal the legendary sword!”

“…I wouldn’t recommend lying to me, Touma.”

“W-What do you mean!? I’m not lying! I just woke up just now! I don’t even know why I’m here!”

“If you say so…”

I don’t know why, but the person in front of me was reading me like a book. It was true that everything was like a blur, but when he mentioned that I tried to steal, everything came flooding back in. My confrontation with Yukou-san and Hisho-san, the moment my body was taken over by my curse, and… that bright light that brought me back to normal.

I remembered, but I still tried to deny it. If I had to guess what could have hinted at my lie, it would be that my eyes were checking both my arms if they were still intact. Even so, is that really enough for him to be so confident that I was lying?

He was looking at me with doubtful eyes. He saw through my lie and threw a passive-aggressive attitude at me…. Tch, how annoying. Why can’t he just believe me? It was a believable excuse.

“Well, let me make this quick for you. Your life was saved by Sakurai-ojii-san. In the middle of the hunter battle royale, your curse took over your body and went on a rampage. You were about to be taken out by the participating hunters until he personally entered the battlefield and saved you from certain death.”

*\*Lies. He’s lying. I remember clearly. The fight at the battle royale was only between me and Yukou-san, and he was the one that summoned that light that saved me! But why… why are they lying to hide the truth? And why is Sakurai-sama playing along with his lies? Why are they trying to keep me in the dark? T-This is so annoying…!\**

“But to save your life meant something else in exchange. The technique that he used had merged your soul with the curse.”

“What!? M-Merged!? You mean that light didn’t save me!?”

“Oh? What light could you mean? Did I say that Sakurai-ojii-san’s technique caused a light?”

“Kh… N-No, I just remembered seeing a bright light is all…”

“Really? But then why aren’t you asking anything about being in the battle royale? If the last thing you could remember was being in the library, then suddenly participating in the battle royale sure is a large gap in your memory. Are you sure you don’t know anything at all?”

“G-Grrr…”

*\*This bastard! He knew all about my lie, but he decided to catch me instead of pursuing the fact that I was lying! Just how arrogant can this guy get!?\**

“Well, seeing that you’re well informed, after all, I’ll continue explaining what happened to your body…”

Listening to this guy’s voice was annoying, and hearing the horror that became of me from him was just pure agony. My soul had been merged with my curse. That meant that its abilities also merged with my body, which was probably why my arms regenerated. Apparently, since the technique that was used to save me needed two souls, they created a soul out of the curse, and that very soul was merged with mine. That meant its emotions, memories, and personality mixed with mine. At that very moment, I learned that I had no way of differentiating myself from the curse. It was like trying to differentiate two tissues of the same brand.

*“\*I am you, and you are me. You have gone far into the darkness. There’s no escaping it. It won’t be long now, your absolute end.\*”*

I remember that dark blob from my dream. It was then that I discovered what it meant by that. The curse that plagued me for years… became part of me as a permanent blight for as long as I live… This is the worst!

“DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU’RE SAYING RIGHT NOW!?”

I couldn’t handle it. Hearing that I had to deal with that thing for the rest of my life broke me.

“YEAH, I WAS LYING EARLIER! SO WHAT!? I KNOW THE TRUTH! THAT YUKOU SENKYO WAS THE ONE THAT PUT THIS CURSE OF A LIFETIME ON ME! WHY DID YOU DO IT!? WHY DID YOU ENGRAVE THIS THING IN MY SOUL!? ANSWER ME!!!”

“…”

He didn’t say anything.

“I SAID ANSWER ME!!!”

“You don’t understand anything.”

He didn’t answer me.

“I WANT YOU TO ANSWER ME!!!”

So I kept screaming at him until he gave me a proper answer, but he didn’t listen. I could barely hear his voice with my screaming, but I heard it clear enough to understand. The line that would torture my mind in the following days.

“We had two choices, to kill you, a person that never got to truly experience anything in his life because of a curse, or sever both of your arms and take one of your eyes, crippling you, making you a normal person with no chances for a normal life… Both choices were bad, so we made our own and decided to save you. Well, I say that but in reality, it’s your choice if you want to be saved or not. We’ve set your path. If you truly want to be released from your suffering, you’ll make the right choice.”

After he said his piece, that wretch walked away without looking back at me.

“HEY!! COME BACK HERE!! I’M NOT DONE TALKING!!! GET BACK HERE YOU BASTARD!!!”

He left me with… this old man so I tried to get answers out of him instead.

“WHAT THE HELL WAS HE ON ABOUT!? TELL ME!! YOU KNEW ABOUT THIS DIDN’T YOU?! IF YOU KNEW I’D ONLY SUFFER EVEN MORE, WHY DIDN’T YOU STOP THEM?! YOU KNEW EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED TO ME OLD GEEZER! DEATH WOULD HAVE BEEN A BETTER OUTCOME THAN THIS!!”

The geezer let out a sigh and kept his usual calm attitude.

“…This. This is why you’re in here. Right now, you are a danger to everyone around you. You cannot control your temper, and you do not even know what you are capable of. If we let you lose in this state, you would be more than likely to kill someone. I know you’ve had this curse for most of your time as a hunter, but right now, this is the best for you.”

“NO SHIT I CAN’T CONTROL MY TEMPER! SOME BASTARD JUST PUT ME ON THE TORTURE RIDE OF A LIFETIME! AND NOW I’M IN PRISON EVEN THOUGH I’M CLEARLY THE VICTIM! HOW CAN I STAY CALM!?”

“…”

I thrust my fist into the bars, strong enough to make a ringing noise around the dungeon, but not enough to break me out of my cage. I can feel my knuckles numbing from that. The old man just stared at me from across the bars, looking at me with pity and disappointment.

“DON’T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT!”

I thrust my fist yet again, this time with my other fist, but it didn’t change anything. The bars didn’t bend. He was still staring at me with those same eyes, and now both of my fists feel like hell. Then, finally, the geezer opened his mouth, but I was by no means happy by it.

“Despite his attitude, he can say some useful things from time to time. Find yourself, then find what you want in life. What you really want. You are a veteran hunter of the Konjou clan, it will be difficult, but do not lose focus. Despite your state, there are still people that are willing to stand by your side. Do not lose them.”

“I DON’T WANT YOUR PHILOSOPHICAL BULLSHIT! GET ME OUT OF HERE!!”

“I said what I had to. Whatever happens, do not lose yourself.”

“HEY! GET BACK HERE!”

He left the same way the other bastard did. He disappeared from the corner of the wall and never looked back. I screamed and screamed and even banged the bars as hard as I can, but even then, he didn’t look back.

**…………**

“Yo! How are you doing? Looks like you’ve calmed down a bit.”

“…”

A familiar voice reached my ears. It was him again. The only person that kept visiting me ever since I was first down here, my childhood friend, Yamamoto Sora. It’s not like I enjoyed his presence, in fact, most of the time I get annoyed by him, but having something to distract me from my mind wasn’t too bad.

“You’ve calmed down but you’re still as cold as ever, huh? Haha…”

I’ve been living this nightmare for more than two weeks now. He said I calmed down but that was only because I accepted that I had no escape from my fate. Going day in and day out with nothing else to do kept me from running away from it. If I didn’t compromise, I wouldn’t have been able to survive this long.

“Oh, get this! This hilarious thing happened at school earlier…”

Every night he comes here to tell me about his day. His cheerful attitude never changed despite our situation, but I know he’s only putting up a brave front. Inside, he was in pain seeing me in here, he is scared that the person he once knew would be gone forever. He’s been like this all these years. I thought with this curse inside of me, I would lose myself and take my anger on him because he didn’t do anything else to prevent this. But my compassion overwhelmed that anger, leaving me silent as I listen to his stories. Ultimately, both of us wore a façade ever since that day.

“…Oh yeah, that reminds me—”

“Enough, go home. It’s already been two hours. I don’t want to hear any more.”

“Whoa, it’s been that long? Man, time sure flies when I’m down here, huh?”

“…”

“…Heh. Well, I guess I’ll come back tomorrow. If you get bored you can always call me!”

That guy never fails to spend at least an hour down here. He has no sense of time and always speaks without thinking about what he’s saying. These are the dungeons. It has a barrier so that I can’t use connect to contact people outside. What do you mean “call you?”

With nothing else to do I head to sleep. A sweet relaxing time where I can regain my energy and rest my mind… is what most people would think.

“Hey, hey! Come with me, let’s play a game!”

“Sure! Sounds fun!”

I found myself standing in a peaceful neighborhood with two cheery kids playing with each other in front of me. Those kids were me and Sora, the past versions of ourselves.

“…You. Feel like breaking yet?”

And an ominous voice called out from behind me. I didn’t need to turn around to know who, no, what it was. A dark, mucky slime with despair in the form of embers burning all over its body, the very image of the curse that haunts me.

“Breaking, huh? If I wanted that then I wouldn’t be here in the first place.”

“I can feel it. Your soul is already wrapped in darkness. If only it weren’t for your savior, you would’ve already been gone.”

“…I would’ve wanted it that way.”

Senkyo made our soul so that we couldn’t just take over the other personality. Our soul is the result of our conjoined memories, emotions, and personalities. We share memories and emotions, but our personalities are half and half. It was hard to identify it at first, but since I had nothing else to do, I dedicated my time to figure out what type of personality my curse took after merging with me.

It was much simpler than I first imagined. It must be because it was just a curse with a fixed goal and nothing else. It simply wanted power and destruction, and to do that, it had to get rid of me, but doing that wasn’t as easy as putting me into depression. It needed to make me submit, to give up my personality. If I did that, I would lose complete control of my mind and body, ultimately disappearing entirely.

“Then why don’t you do just that and rid yourself of your suffering?”

“…How annoying.”

The curse and I can hear each other’s train of thought. Now that we were one soul, it was impossible to have any form of secrecy to the other.

“Making me say it isn’t going to change anything.”

That also meant that it already knew the answer to his question. It was only trying to provoke me by making me say something I wouldn’t want to say out loud.

“Is that so?”

The scene before me suddenly changed. From the day, it became night, and more people entered the scene.

“Hahaha, calm down, Touma. There’s enough cake for everyone.”

“But Dad! I need to eat faster or Sora will take my toys!”

“Hehe, I’m a really fast eater!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll let both of you go at the same time. So just eat and enjoy the food with us.”

“Okay, Mom…”

It was the night when both our parents died. We were inside the living room enjoying a large amount of food laid out on the table. It was a Christmas party with both of our families. We enjoyed our time together, talking, playing, eating, and laughing our hardest. After we finished eating dinner my father was nice enough to let us go and play upstairs while our parents took their time talking to each other. It separated us for only a short while, is what I thought at the time. But I was soon to be proven wrong.

*\*Crash!!\**

When Sora and I were playing by ourselves, a loud crash accompanied by violent shaking brought our joy to an abrupt stop and was immediately taken over by confusion and panic. Then, we heard ear-piercing screams from below us. Normally, we would run downstairs and check on what was happening, in fact, Sora was already heading his way out the door, but fear struck me. The continuous unknown rumbling from below and loud panicked screaming aroused my sense of fear.

Whatever was happening down there was dangerous! That was what my mind screamed at me. Giving in to my primal senses, I called out to Sora to stop him from leaving the room.

“Stop! D-Don’t leave me!”

“W-What? But something’s going on downstairs! We need to check—”

“No!”

I denied him of leaving my side with all my heart. Going downstairs was scary, but being alone without knowing what was happening was even worse. I didn’t want that.

“I-I’m scared… hic, I, hic, I don’t want to be alone!”

Taken over by fear, I bawled my eyes out and tears began to dampen the carpet below me. Sora, who was more than ready to run out of the room came back for me and granted my selfish wish. We stayed there for a while until we heard other voices from downstairs.

“It’s trapped! Finish it off now before it kills any more innocent people!”

“The barrier is up! No bystanders will arrive! Don’t let it escape!”

The rumbling became even more intense but soon died out as well as the screaming voices of the strangers. A minute passed. 5 minutes passed. 10 minutes passed. And nothing changed.

“H-Hey, Touma-kun. I think it’s safe now. We should go downstairs now…”

I nodded lightly as I wiped the remaining tears off my face. We slowly made our way to the stairs without making any noise and heard the strangers’ voices again.

“This is terrible. If only I blocked it instead of dodging it… This wouldn’t have happened! This could’ve been all avoided!”

“Do not blame yourself, Yamazaki. It was a life-or-death situation. Between taking the hit or moving away from it, anyone would choose to not get hit. Take this experience into your heart. This is what happens if we make a simple mistake. All you can do now is train to avoid this from ever happening again.”

“Do you really think training will prevent this from happening again, Sakurai-sensei!?”

“…Of course not! If that were the case, then this would not have happened in the first place! Listen, Yamazaki! This is what our job is. Even if you are the strongest, there will be times like this where a situation is out of your control. We have to accept the result and continue moving. Training is not a sure-fire way to guarantee everyone’s protection, it's something that we do to reduce the possibility of these outcomes and walk away with the right to say that we did all we could! Do not use this experience to lose your will to stop! You will only sully the souls we have lost! Use it to move forward!”

“Y-Yes, Sakurai-sensei! I apologize for my rude tone. I will reflect on my actions.”

“Good. Now, pick up the bodies. We need to begin covering this up as much as we can before leaving. I’ll contact the clan for—”

“Is there something wrong, Sensei?”

“There are others. Over there at the stairs, show yourselves!”

That was the day I met Sakurai Yosuke. He shouted at us and bound our will by only his voice. I wanted to run back into my room, but my body didn’t let me. Sora and I slowly walked down the stairs and showed ourselves, but before they could bark any more orders, we saw what had happened to our parents.

It was the first time we experienced what death was. It wasn’t just simply losing our life, but seeing the life of the ones we love disappear right in front of us. I could feel the tears flowing back out of my reddened eyes, my heart being squeezed like a vice grip, and my mind going blank, failing to process the current situation.

My whole body was stunned. I was unable to move. But Sora was different, he ran straight to his parents’ lifeless bodies and wrapped them in his arms as hard as he can. Meanwhile, I was still stuck on the stairs. That told me everything, the difference in our personalities. How different we were as human beings. However, there was one thing we had in common, and that was our endless stream of tears as we mourned our parents’ death. Later on, the man who took us in after our great loss, Sakurai Kosuke, brought us to the Konjou clan hidden in the nearby mountains.

“…How many times do you plan on showing me this?”

When the scene before me ended, I gave a stoic response to the curse. This wasn’t the first time I saw this, nor was it the second. Because if it was, then I would’ve gone mad, just like on my first night in this dark cell. The multiple times of reliving this scene, my trauma, resulted in my response today.

“Stop pretending to be strong. You are already within my grasp.”

“You don’t get it. I’m just tired. Tired of you, and this world. But I’m sure you already know that.”

“Well then, it’s time for you to wake up. The road to darkness is before you.”

“Road to darkness… I traveled that path for 5 years now. There’s no going back. It’s time to take my revenge.”

I opened my eyes. There isn’t a clock in sight, but if I woke up now then my body clock was all the proof I need to believe it was 3 in the morning. Most of the hunters are now asleep. There are obviously still a handful guarding the dungeon, but with my power, I can escape without raising any alarms.

I walked up to the enhanced iron bars and poked my arm and leg out. Normally, my limbs wouldn’t fit through the spaces of the bars, but as I draw closer to them, I transform my arm and leg to thin purple sheets and effortlessly reach through the bars and turned them back to normal to balance my body. With my left leg out of the jail cell, I pushed the rest of my body out of the cell by turning myself to a thin purple sheet and transforming myself back to normal as I cross the bars.

They underestimated me. Probably because I’m the only one here, they decided to tighten the security only at the exit of the dungeon instead of my cell. I know this because I scouted the area before using basic magic called Detect, a null magic that uses mana to detect entities. The reason I can use mana without a spectral is because of the mana embedded in my body. I can still use spirit power, but not as good as before. I don’t use it in battle either way so that shouldn’t be a problem.

I reach a turn and sense two guards coming my way. When they turned the corner, I was gone. I slipped inside one of the empty cells and avoided getting caught. But this wasn’t good, they were heading straight to my cell. Why now of all times to check for me?

“Tch, how annoying. I guess I’ll have to use a little force after all. These two will be nice practice dummies to warm up with…”

That night, Saito Touma escaped the dungeon.

**…………**

15 found unconscious, 21 injured, and 14 hospitalized. All 50 hunters guarding the dungeon were defeated. Those numbers repeat themselves in my mind making me more anxious than ever before. Earlier today, Touma-kun escaped the Konjou clan’s dungeon without raising any alarms. He somehow took out all of the guards without letting any of them escape to call for reinforcements.

15 unconscious. Those were the people that got injected with paralysis magic, shown by a puncture wound on the bodies of the victims. 21 injured. They were the people who were able to detect Touma-kun and fought back before they were assassinated. But despite detecting him beforehand, they were all taken out by magic spells and light wounds. 14 hospitalized. They were the people who were able to keep up with his sudden and peculiar attacks, but ultimately still defeated. And all 50 hunters were found wrapped in a purple substance, preventing them from moving.

My face paled when I first heard of the news, but it only got worse when I saw the actual scene. It was a brutal battle if you could even call it that, with blood all over the place. The guards that were posted to guard the dungeon were by no means weak. They were all strong and experienced with various fights against spirits and demons, some of them even won in the battle royale in the past. Yet every single one of them was taken out.

We investigated Touma-kun’s house in the residential area and found traces of him being inside. We don’t know what he took with him but it was most likely essentials like money, food, and clothing.

Later that Wednesday morning school was ongoing. Watanabe-san was excused by the school under the pretense of a club activity of the WADDLER Club. Unable to clear my head, I used Connect to communicate with Yukou-kun. I informed him of the situation and asked for help. It ended with me being a bit rude. Despite being the one asking for help, I couldn’t help but scream in my mind when I heard the only two possibilities.

*“\*Are you sure there aren’t any other possibilities!?\*”*

*“\*I’m sure. Saito-san either broke out with his own will, or his body was taken over by the curse.\*”*

*“\*There’s no way Touma-kun would think of betraying us! Didn’t you say before that the only way for him to be possessed was if he decided to give in to the curse and erase his personality!? T-There must be some other reason!\*”*

*“\*Look, Yamamoto-san, I’m sorry but I don’t know anything about his relationship with the curse any more than you do. I wasn’t the one that merged their souls, it was Ryosei. But for some reason, I don’t have his memories about what he did. If there’s another possibility then I’m missing information. But I don’t think he would keep important information from us. You should try to accept one of the possibilities.\*”*

*“\*Kgh…\*”*

In all honesty, I didn’t need to ask Yukou-kun about the possibilities of what happened. All it takes is simple logic. But I refused to accept those possibilities, so I asked him only to get the same answer.

I don’t have any definite proof, but I think that he escaped with his own will. Touma-kun is the strongest person I know in the world. Endowed with a sharp intuition, incredible tenacity, and mind-boggling patience, he fought his curse head-on for 5 years now.

It suddenly got terrifyingly worse a week before the battle royale. Thanks to Yukou-kun he got better, but that didn’t mean Touma-kun wasn’t suffering anymore. He was highly unstable the first time I visited him in the dungeons, I knew everything became harder for Touma-kun, but I believed he could take it on.

On the night before his escape, had a feeling he regained control of himself. Unlike other nights, he didn’t shoo me away and listened silently as it talked about my day. But what genuinely got my hopes up was when he told me to go home. He told me to go home because it was already late at night. I had school in the morning so he ended our conversation the moment it hit 11pm. I have no idea how he can be so accurate with the time despite not having a clock, but he was looking out for me. Other people might think it was because he had his plan to escape so he got rid of me, but I know that’s not true. Because when he’s concerned about other people, he always looks at them in the eye.

Thoughts about Touma’s situation circle around my head. I was filled with hope that he finally overcame his curse, but I was also anxious, anxious because I couldn’t think of a reason why he would escape. He knows he wasn’t being kept inside to be punished. If he showed that he controlled the curse, he would’ve been let out. What is he thinking?

“Saito-kun? Why are you here? Weren’t you hospitalized?”

I turn my head to the teacher who mentioned Touma-kun, following his gaze I find the very person I’m worried about standing at the entrance of the classroom with absolutely no wounds.

“Hm? …Ah, yeah. I was released yesterday. Sorry, I forgot to inform the school.”

“I see. Well if that’s the case, go ahead and take your seat.”

I watch him carefully as he walked towards me, heading to his seat beside me. I scrutinize his whole body and there aren’t any signs of the purple substance the curse produces. Next, I stare at his eyes examining his expression. I know he can see me in the corner of his vision, but he ignored me and kept a stone face as he sat down.

*“\*T-TOUMA-KUN?! Why are you here!? Wait, no, why did you escape the dungeons!? Hey! Listen to me!\*”*

I use Connect to send my thoughts to him but he continued to ignore me. I kept my stare at the board in front of the class to avoid catching the teacher’s notice, but I didn’t stop trying to get Touma-kun’s attention.

“What a pain…”

He muttered under his breath instead of using Connect. It was his usual cold response that I was accustomed to. I didn’t sense any malice in his voice or any signs of the curse taking over, I was right. Then… was his escape just a rash decision? I-I can’t tell. But if it is, surely \**he\** could help!

I kept silent until lunch break came. He left the classroom and I followed behind him, but I can tell we weren’t walking to the cafeteria for some nice lunch. I didn’t try to hide the fact that I was following him, I was directly behind him, letting my presence be known. Finally, he stopped. He led me to the back of the school building, deep within the thick trees where no one would find us.

“This is the last time I’ll let you follow me.”

“Huh?”

“From now on, I’ll be on my own. After what I did, I’m probably considered a threat to the clan. A level B threat at the very least.”

“W-What!? You’re wrong! You can still come back! You won’t be considered a threat, I know it! Sakurai-san won’t let that happen!”

“That’s just optimistic thinking. It will happen, I’m sure. More importantly, you aren’t asking me about my curse. How can you put so much trust in me?”

“Because I know you! There’s no way you’ll be taken over by some curse! You’re the strongest person I know! You should just come back to the clan! People will look at you wrongly after what you’ve done… but we can just say that your curse rampaged and you were able to win against it afterward! You’ll be fine!”

Touma-kun pointed a slight grin at me.

“Heh, good to see your true colors again. It must’ve been suffocating inside that mask.”

A mask, huh? He’s not wrong. I didn’t care if I need to lie or do a few wrongs to get what I want, but this isn’t what I want to hear. Not right now.

“This isn’t the time for jokes! Come on, just come back!”

“That wasn’t a joke, neither was my escape. You know full well that no one would believe that story. A hunter rampaged because of a curse and conveniently escaped without any casualties? No one is going to swallow that story. Not to mention going to my house and picking up essentials as well as this one uniform. I’m sure everyone back in the clan has figured it out by now.”

“Kgh… N-No, you’re wrong! I’m certain…”

I was trying to think of an excuse, but I know how sharp the higher-ups of the clan are. I’m lying, but that’s what I need to do to keep Touma-kun from leaving.

“I know you better than anyone, Sora. I knew you would be the first to figure out the truth, as well as the last person to figure out why I decided to escape.”

“W-What do you mean by that!?”

“Go figure it out yourself. I came to school today to warn you. The clan will probably send units to hunt me down. Even if you’re one of those people, I won’t show you any mercy. I held back in the dungeons, but not anymore. If any hunters attack me, I won’t hesitate to kill. You can relay this message to the clan, though… you’ll have no chance of defeating me.”

“Wh-What…?”

He’s glaring straight into my eyes. This is a threat. A genuine threat. This is wrong. This is all wrong! Why is Touma-kun threatening to kill us!? W-Was I wrong about the curse? No, I can’t be. Then is this the curse’s influence? It has to be! Its personality merged with him that’s why he’s acting like this!

My emotions run rampant, and my anger takes over. The curse isn’t completely gone. Touma-kun is doing his best fighting against it, but the curse was about to make him do something he didn’t want. The worst part is he doesn’t even realize that! They have a single soul, so it must be hard to tell apart from each other. I have to stop him!

“After school, don’t try to find me.”

“…”

He turned his back to me, leaving me behind. I grit my teeth as I watch his back disappearing into the trees. I swear on my very life, that before this day ends, I will bring Touma-kun back to his senses! I return to the classroom, not to take classes, but to enhance.

Later that afternoon, school was out and I made sure to follow behind Touma-kun, not letting him escape my sights. There’s no need to hide anything. I’m sure he already knows about my intentions. But before either of us could leave, we were intercepted by the only person I informed of Touma’s location. Sakurai-san.

Touma-kun stops abruptly and the two glare at each other with such intensity that the air around us plummet and was taken over by a spine-chilling atmosphere. I called Sakurai-san earlier through Connect and told him about the situation as well as his threat. The tension between the two is even affecting the other students around us, making them steer clear of us. Although to begin with, Sakurai-san wearing grandiose traditional clothing like this will make anyone want to avoid him.

Touma-kun turned his head over his shoulder and directed his gaze to me, knowing I was the one who contacted Sakurai-san. I responded with a serious gaze of my own, verbally telling him to stop what he was doing. He ignored me and faced Sakurai-san.

“So, what do you want?”

“Hm… Taking responsibility. I can see you took our advice. You did well.”

“Get to the point.”

“…This is the path you have chosen, and I am here to tell you about its consequences. It has been decided earlier that there will be a target on your head, a Threat Level A. After seeing what you have done and what you are capable of, I am sure you already expected this.”

“WHAT!?”

I couldn’t help but let out a loud scream. Was I hearing right!? Threat level A? On Touma-kun!? Threat Levels are what we measure our enemies’ power with. Depending on the kind of enemy, may it be a spirit or demon, these threat levels tell us which hunters and how many to commission in battle.

From the lowest to highest threat level comes threat level D, followed by C, B, A, then the highest, S. Level Ds consists ghosts and eidolons, level Cs consists of revenants, level Bs consists spirits and seers, level As consists of visitants and guardians, and level Ss consists of sentinels, demigods, and gods.

Due to our lack of knowledge and experience with Zerid, we could only rank the species that we’ve encountered in the past. One of those ranked species is called Dehin, the species that cursed Touma-kun. They are considered as a Threat Level A, handled by multiple parties of skilled hunters. But why? Why did they officially mark Touma-kun as an enemy!? He’s just another victim too! I’m sure they know that but they still did this! I wanted to take all my anger on Sakurai-san, but Touma-kun’s hardened tone cut me off. Did he know I was going to react like this too?

“WHAT DO YOU—”

“Going out of your way to come here just to tell me that? You must be bored!”

“This is my way of taking responsibility. I was the one that told you to choose a path, if this is the one you chose then I am partly at fault.”

“As stiff as ever huh, old man? If that’s all then I’ll be on my way. Surely, you don’t think of making a scene in public are you?”

“Take your leave. In the first place, my real objective here isn’t you.”

“That so?”

Touma-kun proceeded to walk past Sakurai-san and out the school gate.

“Wait!”

I try to chase after him, but I was stopped in my tracks by Sakurai-san. My shoulder suffered a tight clasp from his hand, making me unable to move any further. Something in me broke. The bottle that I kept all my anger tightly locked in had burst.

This bastard… He let Touma-kun get a level A target. He didn’t even try to stop him from leaving, but instead, he’s trying to stop me!? What is his problem!? Doesn’t he think anything of him?

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING!? LET GO OF ME, YOU USELESS OLD COOT!”

“Get your head together. What are you planning on doing?”

“I’M GOING TO HELP TOUMA-KUN! HOW ABOUT YOU!? WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS!? DON’T YOU CARE ABOUT HIM!?”

“Surely you are not thinking of fighting him, are you?”

“WHAT ABOUT IT!? IT’S BETTER THAN WHAT YOU’RE DOING! I’M SURE IF I BEAT THE CRAP OUT OF HIM, HE’LL REALIZE THAT HE’S JUST BEING INFLUENCED BY THE CURSE!”

“You are insane! That plan will never work. In the first place, you would have no chance against a Level A.”

“WHY DID YOU EVEN COME HERE!? I CALLED YOU HERE BECAUSE I THOUGHT YOU WOULD DO SOMETHING ABOUT TOUMA-KUN! WHY ARE YOU DOING THE OPPOSITE!? I SHOULD’VE NEVER CALLED YOU OVER!”

Why can’t he understand!? Why does he only think about rules and regulations!? Why isn’t he doing anything about Touma-kun? Yukou-kun saved Touma-kun so he could live his life the way he wants to! If he’s being influenced by the curse to do something, then this chance will be wasted!

“…Is that so? Even though you called me to help, you continue to whine and refuse to communicate. So be it, do as you wish. Just make sure to report to my office later tonight. Be sure to prepare for a long self-reflection session.”

He loosened his grip on my shoulder, so I forcefully shove it back with that shoulder and ran out the school gate. I don’t care what scolding that guy has for me, but one thing’s for sure, I’ve lost all my respect for him.

I ran a good distance away from the school. Needless to say, Touma-kun was nowhere to be found, and looking around town aimlessly won’t do me any good. At this point, I’m better off going back home and volunteering to work on night patrol. But maybe, just maybe, he went back to the place where it all started.

I arrive at a familiar neighborhood. I could still recognize the buildings around me as I walked through them. A feeling of nostalgia hits me as I look around but I focus myself on my goal. I face forward and spot Touma-kun staring at a huge house. It was a newly built house with a built-in garage. It’s the youngest building on the street. How do I know that? Well, that’s because this is where both our houses once stood.

The incident was covered as a fire accident. The clan used a barrier similar to the Konjou clan’s illusion barrier to keep people from approaching the scene. They then used their tools to make a convincing accident that no one would question. Of course, that meant burning both our houses to the ground. Touma-kun and I were reported found in the woods playing that night without our parents’ permission.

Our whole incident was summarized: Amidst the panic of their runaway children, the parents left the stove open and caused a grease fire. It abruptly spread when the residents attempted to use water to extinguish the flames. We were blamed for our own tragedy. Although it sounds cruel, this is something we chose to do.

While we were being sheltered at the Konjou clan that dreadful night, Touma-kun and I overheard one of the hunters talking to Sakurai-san about the incident’s cover. They told him that the cover will be a fire accident and that we would be the reason for our parents’ “carelessness” in the incident. I was outraged that they even considered that, but Sakurai-san outright refused the proposal before I could even say anything about it and immediately quelled my anger. But unexpectedly, Touma-kun came up to the two of them and insisted that he was blamed for the incident. That he was the one that dragged me outside and was the sole cause for the incident. I didn’t know why he said such a thing. But I thought that if he was going to be blamed, I was going down that road with him. Which is how everything played out as it did.

The Konjou Clan took us in and we lived in their residential area for two years. It was in our third year that we decided to become hunters to prevent any tragedies like what happened to us. After three months of training, we were assigned to our first mission and were officially hunters. At the end of that year, was the mission that cursed Touma-kun, and five years later, we arrived here. Touma-kun fought the curse alone for those five years. He was able to win against it even after getting completely possessed, but that didn’t mean it didn’t affect him. After five years of doing nothing but putting on a smile, it’s my time to finally do something about it.

“I said not to find me, didn’t I?”

I lost my focus for a minute. I didn’t notice that I was fixed on the same house Touma-kun was staring at. His sudden utterance brought my senses back.

“I couldn’t help myself. I want to save you.”

“Not this again. If you plan on bringing me back, as I said before, I won’t show any mercy.”

“Can you really defeat me though?”

“That’s my line.”

He turned his back to me and walked away, so I followed him. He wasn’t trying to get away, he already accepted the fact that I wasn’t letting him go. He was following one of the rules of the clan. No hunter shall engage enemies in public unless necessary. Touma-kun was leading me to a secluded area for me to attack him. His consideration fueled me with the hope that I could still help him. Dusk had arrived by the time we stopped deep in a forest at the edge of town.

“I was hoping this was another one of your terrible jokes.”

“I thought the same when you escaped the dungeons. I’m here to return the favor.”

I took the equipment I always kept in my bag. My uniform’s cloak, fingerless gloves, kunai, intertwine gear, and various enhancer tools. I learned from my mistakes. The time that hollowed knight took Kaede-san hostage, I only brought my cloak, intertwine gear, and the six kunai that was already attached to it. I was unable to fight against it due to my lack of tools. So I began to bring my other tools as well, in turn, my bag became heavy and bulkier, but now I know it was the right decision. Equipped with the weapons hidden inside my cloak, I leave my bag behind and face him.

“I appreciate waiting for me to get ready! You really are nice, Touma-kun! Keep this up and you’ll be branded as a tsundere!”

“Putting on that act won’t do you any good. You know very well, Sora. That enhancers are the weakest when they’re alone, especially you.”

“I can take care of myself. I’m not afraid of you because I know you won’t kill me! I know the real Touma-kun would never kill anyone!”

“Really now?”

Looks like my words weren’t enough to reach him. Just as I ready the two kunai in my hand, a purple tentacle appeared from behind him and stretched towards me at an incredible speed. Since I was expecting attacks similar to a Dehin, I was prepared for this. It was just like when he was possessed at the battle royale. I threw one of my kunai at a tree in the distance as I jumped upwards to dodge his attack.

The tentacle below me began to distort, but I had nothing to worry about. The kunai I threw finally made contact with the tree. Multiple sharp spikes rose from the tentacle below me but I was able to pull away from it by retracting the thread attached to the embedded kunai.

I feel the breeze brushing against my body, the cloak fluttering behind me, and the leaves leaving a trail of my path as I close into the tree where my kunai was embedded at breakneck speed. I throw two more kunai, one to a different tree and one towards Touma-kun. I then change course as I reel myself towards the new tree my kunai hit. As for the first kunai embedded in a tree, I released it and directed it to head towards him as well.

I throw two more kunai towards the trees to help me maneuver through obstacles and circle around Touma-kun. I use the three trees my kunai were attached to clear my path of obstruction. Then, I release two kunai, one retracting towards me while I directed the other towards him as fast as I can.

I launch one more towards a tree closer to him, released the last one previous kunai I was using, and threw it to a tree past Touma to better position myself. The moment that kunai hit, I reel towards it, release the other kunai, and threw it at his shoulder as I passed above him. With this, I have four kunai heading towards him in all directions, one I’m currently using to travel, and one more available.

I trained for this. I threw all four kunai with barely any interval before their arrival. I can’t do quick calculations, but the kindled spirit power on my kunai is enough to tell me I’m right. I was a complete blur to him. If it weren’t for the barrier protecting my eyes, I would have been blinded. The speed I could execute this technique showed how much I honed it. This is my fighting style, Complete Spirit Power Flow!

This is an original technique I came up with. Before I became an enhancer, both Touma-kun and I were brutes. We only learned as far as its basics, but that was enough for me to create this technique. Complete Spirit Power Flow uses the spirit power from a brute’s barrier to be able to wrap everything I’m in contact with, then I use poltergeist to move anything how I want.

My contraption, the intertwine gear, was a perfect match for this technique. The intertwine gear is as simple as it can get. It’s made with a metal cylinder with six rolls of strong thread attached to my combat belt. It is completely powered by my spirit power. It allows me to constantly flow my spirit power to all my kunai, giving me the ability to latch them onto any surface even if its smooth metal, pulling myself wherever I want, making my kunai move in different directions in the air, sharpen them, harden them, enhance them, as well as annoying tricks like this…

From here, I can clearly see the threads of three of the four kunai I threw at Touma-kun will get caught by trees, making my attack useless. But before the threads get caught by the trees, they untied themselves, circled around the trees, and re-tied themselves to the kunai in mid-air.

I exploited a rule of kindled spirit power. Even with my kunai detached from my threads, I still have 10 seconds before the spirit power disappears and lose control. Kindled spirit power only begins to disappear when it loses its constant flow of spirit power, so as long as I reconnect my threads within 10 seconds, I can keep constant control of my kunai.

All four of my kunai were heading for Touma-kun at full power. My kunai are sharpened blades enhanced with a blessing to penetrate through his curse’s ability. Surely, even if he uses his curse, I should…!

Just as I thought I used enough power to enhance my kunai, another three tentacles sprouted from his back and blocked all four of my kunai.

“Damn it…!”

I quickly redirect all four of those kunai to the nearby trees to be able to move in the air however I want. I throw a kunai directly at his face. He tried to intercept it with a tentacle, but it explodes and spreads a thick smoke over his vision.

As the smoke slowly subsided, he heard numerous clicking noises all around him. The source of those clicking sounds was many of the items I’ve been enhancing back in class. Tricky Marbles!

Countless marbles surround Touma-kun, many on the ground and even more falling from the sky. Not a second later, every single marble explodes assaulting his ears with deafening explosions. Once I landed on the ground, I release all four of my kunai and directed them inside the smoke intersecting at the spot Touma-kun stood.

“…!”

I can feel it! All four of them hit! The tricky marbles weakened him! Every single one of those marbles were vessels I made and enhanced them with different effects: weakness, slowness, blindness, and deafening. Everything caught by those explosions was inflicted with those effects. My goal wasn’t to kill Touma-kun, it was only to weaken him. Meanwhile, I used all four of my kunai that were strengthened with amplified blessing enhancement to penetrate his defenses.

“Wha!?”

Before the smoke dispersed, I could feel all four of my kunai severed from my threads. I quickly retract them but he took hold of the threads before I got them outside the smoke. I forcefully snap my threads using spirit power to prevent him from using them against me.

I take five kunai out of my cloak and tie my available threads on each one. With my intertwine gear replenished with kunai, I hide three of them in my cloak while I hold two of them in hand and take the defensive.

All of the sudden, Touma-kun appeared in front of me. Both his arms turned to purple spikes and thrust them at me. I panicked slightly from his sudden surprise attack, but I was able to parry them. I was about to close in to cut his shoulders off but I notice his stomach distorting.

“Kgh!”

I forcefully pull myself away from him by using my intertwine gear. Before he came out of the smoke, I preemptively latched one of my kunai to the trees behind me in case I needed a quick escape, and that time is now!

A kunai launched from my cloak to prevent him from immediately chasing me down. I enhanced it with weakness and slowness to buy me some time and detonated them in front of him.

I reach into my belt and take out several pieces of paper and throw them around me. They were talismans I made to function as traps. Unlike kindled spirit power, enhanced vessels like this can only have one function at a time, but they aren’t limited to any time limit. Which means I can activate them at any time I want.

Using the 10 seconds of control I have on them, I placed them strategically throughout the forest. On the trees, branches, rocks, and the ground. Touma-kun left the cloud of smoke caused by my kunai without any signs of exhaustion or infirmity. I can only imagine his curse can also block out my enhancements.

He looks around and spots the few decorations I’ve made to the area. However, he still seems unfazed. Instead of coming in for the attack, he stares straight into my eyes and utters one word.

“One.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond, but I have no time to be confused. Knowing Touma-kun, this can be an attempt to regenerate his energy. I need to strike now!

I take out a kunai to replace the one I lost and threw five of them at him. I directed all five of them to close in from all sides. One of his back tentacles tried to intercept one of my kunai, but before they made contact, I detonated that kunai and severed it from his body.

Even Touma-kun seemed to be surprised. Instead of using crippling enhancements on him, I decided to take a bit more risk and enhanced them with blessing. By using this, I have a higher chance of killing Touma-kun, so I have to be careful and avoid his heart, but I can manage that much!

When he realized I changed tactics, he jumped up in the air to avoid the rest of my kunai. But it was a futile attempt at the face of my technique. All four remaining kunai took a sharp turn upwards, chasing him like homing missiles. He transformed his leg into a shield to take on the impact, but that also meant losing sight of them. I quickly amplify their power and speed and sent them to go around the shield.

Two tentacles were able to intercept two of my kunai, but the rest were able to break through and reach their target. All four of my kunai detonate, making a stupendous mini-fireworks show, destroying two of his tentacles and both his legs. This was my chance!

I dash towards his falling body and intercept the course of his fall, with his back completely open to me, I take hold of my kunai and aim for his shoulder. But before I could get close enough to attack, his last tentacle expanded into a shield and protected his backside. I was about to take more kunai from my belt, but I notice the center of his shield distorting again. I quickly stop myself and leap backward. Not even a second later, three spikes came from his shield and punctured the air of where I previously was.

What the hell!? He can still use his curse like that!? I replenish my intertwine gear’s kunai and take a mental note that I have two backup kunai left to work with. I won’t have enough to replenish another set. I have to make this work!

I watch him from the distance, observing his every move. He was supporting himself with his last back tentacle. Taking him on like this won’t be too hard, I’m almost there! That was what I thought until I watched the ends of his hacked-off feet distort and regenerate both his legs back.

“Two.”

I still don’t know what he’s counting up to, but no doubt I was beginning to feel frustrated. I already used up quite a lot of resources, but that only took out three of his back tentacles. Despite how bad the situation seemed, I controlled my emotions and retreat into the forest.

There was no doubt his surprise attack earlier was a flash strike. I don’t know how much spirit power he can still use. I should be careful and assume he can it again. With that in mind, I send out all six of my threaded kunai to secure the area around me and take out two of my extra kunai to defend against those sudden attacks. I just need to wait.

I stand completely still, watching the movement in the forest, waiting for him to come. I don’t expect him to suddenly emerge from the trees. He is one of the few people that know how my techniques work after all. With all six of my kunai afloat, they are now acting as a kind of alarm. Even with the speed of flash strike, I’ll still be able to react in time. With that option eliminated, there was only one place he can use to attack me. From above!

*\*BOOOOM!!\**

An explosion lit up above me, and coming down from the sky was Touma-kun. He lost form from my trap, It’s now or never! I threw one of the kunai I was holding towards him. Even without his form, he was still able to create a shield, but that didn’t matter!

The smoke the explosion created masked my true intentions. From within the smoke, I appeared and delivered an ax kick on Touma-kun, sending him directly towards the ground. He turned his body and pointed the shield at me while he used his other tentacle to break his fall. But that wasn’t going to save him, the reason being that an explosive talisman was below him.

*\*BOOOOM!!\**

“Kgh!”

The explosion destroyed his last tentacle and sent him airborne long enough for me to position myself and punch him towards the closest tree. A tree that wasn’t only tall and sturdy, but also one that had another one of my talismans on it. The explosion sent him hurling back towards me which was enough time for me to throw the rest of my tricky marbles at him. These marbles weren’t like the first batch. I enhanced them just now to stick to their target and detonate a powerful explosion tinged with a small blessing enhancement.

All the marbles that I hurled towards him stuck to him like magnets. I feel incredibly reluctant to do this, but I’m sure Touma-kun won’t die. I made sure to not stick anything near his heart. I mentally prepare myself as I was about to do something incredibly cruel to my friend. I need to make him realize that he’s being influenced by the curse! Come back to your senses, Touma-kun!

*\*BOOOOM!!\**

I detonated two marbles below him and to his side, sending him flying towards another tree with a talisman, following that with two more explosions to the side, sending him to a talisman placed on the ground. Once he was airborne again followed another explosion that sent him to another tree with a talisman. I repeated this, making him unable to move, weakening him enough to the point where he can’t regenerate. Since my crippling attacks won’t work on him, I’ll just have to do it manually.

The marbles made huge explosions, but only deal a small amount of damage since I only enhanced a tiny mass of blessing into them. My goal is to send him to every talisman—the traps that will damage and weaken him. There was no doubt he was getting sick from all this spinning around.

Every explosion I detonate inflicted the same pain inside me, every single one slowly made me lose my resolve to continue, but this was the only way. I need to do this, or else, his freedom will be taken again!

With all of the talismans used up, I use the remaining marbles to position him directly in front of a tree. I launched all six of my kunai to embed him into the tree. They traced his clothes and suspended him to the tree. I then use that outline to make a small barrier so that he wouldn’t be able to escape.

“Haah… Haah… Haah…”

Using all that focus drained the energy out of me, but I still make my way to Touma-kun. Unlike me, he wasn’t trying to catch his breath, but there was no doubt my attacks were effective. Too much, in fact. His body was wounded all over. He was covered with bruises and abrasions spilled some of his blood from his body.

I felt my heart break the moment I saw him like that, though I have no one else to blame but myself. I need to swallow this pain and wake up Touma-kun.

“…”

Huh? W-Wait, what am I supposed to say? “Are you still the Touma-kun I know?”, no, that’s wrong. I know he’s still in control of his body, he’s just being influenced! T-Then what do I say now? “Have you come to?”, “Do you realize what you’re doing?”, “You’re being influenced by the curse, snap out of it!”, no, that feels wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! WRONG!

My mind was a mess. Before I could even say anything, Touma-kun spoke.

“Using complete spirit power flow to trap me and hiding small mana-triggered talismans behind leaves to keep me from noticing. I’ll give it to you; I didn’t think you’d be able to go all out against me.”

My complete spirit power flow. Since I was a brute before, I also know how to create a perception field. Because I neglected to train that ability when I changed classes, I could only create small 5-meter fields. To make up for that, I used perception field on all six of my kunai to make a larger field. Since Touma-kun knew that, I forced him to attack from above where I stuck a talisman that activates when it detects mana in a certain radius. That was the secret to my attack. But why is he bringing it up now? Not knowing how to respond, I stay silent.

“But that begs the question, why did you try so hard, Sora?”

“W-What do you mean? To save you, of course! Don’t you realize that you’re being influenced by the curse!? You threatened us saying that you’d kill anyone that came for you, and you were serious! The Touma-kun I know would never say something like that!”

“…Is that so? I’m being influenced, you say? Then, why the hell am I not killing you now, huh!?”

“What are you on about? You can’t even kill me inside that barr—!?”

Tiny spikes sprouted from his body, piercing through all six of the kunai that were holding the barrier. The barrier began to disappear and the wounds I inflicted on his body along with it. I tried to reach for the last two kunai that I had on my belt, but I took an awful roundhouse kick to the face, knocking me down to the ground and dropping the last of my weapons. With my mind thrown into confusion and my face to the ground, his claim shut me down completely.

“Three. This is the third time in our battle that I could’ve killed you.”

“H-Huh?”

“From the start, I didn’t plan on going all out. But despite that, despite not even taking you seriously, I still could’ve killed you three times. This is the difference between our power… and this is the control I can have over my body. Now, do you still think I’m being influenced?”

“Wh… I…”

I’m speechless. Those times he had been counting were the times I could’ve died…? And after that, he’s going to say that his decision to kill people was all within his own volition? No… no, I don’t want that! I don’t want to accept that!

“Y-You’re lying! If that’s the case, then how can you say that with a serious face!? Why would the Touma-kun I know say that he would be ready to kill at any time!?”

“…Before this fight started, you said, ‘I’m not afraid of you because I know you won’t kill me. I know the real Touma-kun would never kill anyone.’ You were half-right and half-wrong. Even with this curse’s personality inside me, killing you didn’t feel right to me. Simply thinking about it made me sick. Despite all this, I still think of you as a friend.”

“….”

A-A friend…? Touma-kun is… calling me his friend again…? What kind of dream…

“But on the other hand, I’ve changed. Anyone else that tries to stop me, even if it's Senkyo, the person who gave me this chance to live, I won’t show any mercy. I will kill without remorse.”

What I heard from Touma-kun was especially bothering. I would normally blow up and deny him this very second. But why do I feel like I’m in the wrong?

“Why…? If this was really your own decision… then why…!?”

“This is my revenge on this world that cursed me.”

“…What do you mean?”

“When I woke up in the dungeons for the very first time, the old man and Ryosei visited me. They told me that only I could save myself at this point, that I had to choose a path, one that I would walk for the rest of my life. I didn’t listen to them at first. They caged me, after all. But since the curse made me face my horrors, my trauma, my weakness, I had to overcome them to keep myself sane. It took me a while… a long while, 5 years to be exact, but I finally got there. I don’t want to be taken by this curse. The path I chose is separation from the clan. I want to find something that will cure this curse, or at least bury it with something, even if it takes me my whole life. Being a part of the clan won’t do me any good. Waiting a month to become trusted again only to leave will just be a waste of a month. I want to be free and find what I want as fast as I can! Sitting in a cell, caged like a dangerous animal is only a death sentence! Do you understand what I’m saying, Sora!?”

“…!”

“……”

Touma-kun kept his gaze locked into my eyes. Unwavering resolve, fierce determination, and burning desire. Those feelings were what reflected in his eyes. And in deep contrast to his… my eyes were filled with tears. I barely managed to silence my cries, but I let the embodiment of my sorrow, regret, guilt, shame, and dismay flow down my face, dirtying the ground with its filth.

This!? I fought Touma-kun to do this!? I took out everything I had, mercilessly attacked him, and wounded him all over for some delusion I stuck in my head all this time!? I convinced myself that he was being influenced to do something he didn’t want, but if I think about it logically, why would anyone want to stay caged, doing nothing just to suffer? I got angry for all the wrong reasons because I kept clinging to the image I saw Touma-kun in.

Endowed with incredible tenacity? Mind-boggling patience? Just because of that, I left Touma-kun alone for 5 years, just to act against him at the very end! What the hell am I doing!? In the end, Touma-kun is still human! Not some all-powerful being!

I failed to understand that the person I was calling my childhood friend was changing as the years go by. Just because he had a curse on him, I always thought that if that disappeared, then he would return to his old cheerful self, the Touma-kun that I saw before the tragedy. What kind of fairytale dream am I trying to live!?

My condition only worsens, to the point where I can’t even keep my cries in check. I wailed pathetically in front of the person I always looked up to. The look in his eyes only brings me pain. They empathize just how much I messed up with my life. I can’t bear to look at them, so I continue to bawl my eyes out staring at the ground.

“…I-I’m sorry! Hic, hic, I’m sorry, hic, Touma-kun…!”

I continue to apologize to him in the most mortifying way possible. I couldn’t even manage to look at the eye of the person I was trying to apologize to. I wish I could just crawl into a hole and die. Just as I was thinking of such things, Touma-kun spoke.

“…You care too much.”

I can hear him, but I can’t stop crying.

“On that night, the night where everything began, it showed me clearly how differently we are as people. You’re a person that cares too much about their loved ones to the point where you’d rush into danger without a second thought. Meanwhile, I’m a person that focuses on themselves and survival more than anything else. It’s probably because we’re completely different people that everything ended up like this.”

“Kgh…!”

“But maybe because we’re polar opposites that I was able to survive this long.”

“…”

“You were always there to remind me the kind of person I wanted to be.”

“…?”

“Kind, caring, friendly, cheerful, optimistic, but at the same time, strong, mindful, and self-aware. That was the kind of person I wanted to be. I got annoyed every time you got close to me. It reminds me how much I hate myself and that I’ll never become the same person as you. But at the same time, it was the one thing that got me to accept my harsh reality faster than anything that curse threw at me. Thanks.”

“Wha… What do you mean!? That doesn’t sound anything like me at all! If I was like that, then this would’ve never happened!”

“That’s only because you were facing me, Sora. You got caught up with the stress of my curse. Because you knew I was in pain, because you cared too much about me, because you are who you are, you masked your true self to try and help me, and you failed to notice the truth.”

“You’re wrong!”

“No, I’m right. I know it for a fact. I’ve been watching you, after all. We’re childhood friends.”

“W-Wha…”

“This is as much time I’m going to give you. Go fix yourself up and go home. You’ve got a sermon with the old man, don’t you? Oh, and take off that mask. It doesn’t suit you.”

I sat there silent. My cries are long gone, and only a few remnants of tears stay on my face. I watch my childhood friend’s back shrink into the distance and disappear from my sight as he got swallowed by the darkness. A childhood friend, you say? Why now of all times? Why the hell are you this strong? What do you mean you envied me? You have it the other way around…! Hey! Come back! Don’t go! Touma-kun! Touma-kuuuun!!

I sat there in my lonesome for a while longer. Wiping my newly shed tears. It wasn’t regret, guilt, shame, dismay, or any of the sort. I shed my tears once more in bittersweetness as I realize it was our time to separate ways. After being with each other for almost our whole lives through thick and thin, it’s time for us to grow and spread our wings, taking our own separate paths.

“It isn’t even our third-year graduation yet… why does everything come and go so quickly?”

That night, I returned to the clan and gave my deepest apologies to Sakurai-sensei. I didn’t bother to figure out if he truly cared about Touma-kun or not, I just brushed him away with anger along with the advice he was about to give me.

I spent my whole night getting lectured by him. But by the end of that night, I got him to accept my one request—to make it so that the clan will cease their hunt for Touma-kun until he hurts a civilian with his curse. The next day, it became a controversial topic within the clan. But on Friday of that week, the clan chief officially accepted this request and ceased all hunts on Touma-kun until it was confirmed that he hurt a civilian. That meant having hunters monitoring him, but this was the best I can do to help him. He decided to spread his wings, so it’s about time I did the same.

**Chapter 5: A Great Relationship**

*\*You are not human.\**

I heard a voice. It belonged to the woman that lived below the Konjou Clan’s settlement. She was the elf known as Freda.

*\*You are not human.\**

She repeated the sentence again. For some reason, now slightly distorted.

*\*You are not human.\**

She repeated again. Now in a high pitch voice. The voice she then took sounded slightly familiar. I’ve only heard it for a brief moment in my whole life, but the weight that this voice carried was enough to embed its words in my head.

*\*You are not human.\**

That’s right. I remember now. It was from a strange spirit that took the form of a little boy. The very one that made an attempt on my life, treating me like nothing but another toy for him to break. The Lightning Leader, Fulgur.

*\*You are not human! You are not human! You are not human! You are not human!\**

The moment I realized this, he repeated it faster and louder. As if it were a chant to crystalize his words.

*\*You are an anomaly! Anomaly! ANOMALY!!\**

He appeared in front of me. Circling me like a shark, shoving his face in front of mine, locking his maddened eyes with mine filled with fear.

*\*An existence that will never be accepted in this world! You’ll die a cruel death just like I did!\**

A sharp blade appeared from the shadows behind him. It was so quick that I wouldn’t have even noticed if I blinked. It slid across his neck, parting his head with his body. Normally, that would mean he died, but his headless body caught his head and turned the bloody head toward me.

*\*See you in hell… Little Brother…!\**

“WHA!? Hahh…! Hahh…! Hahh…!”

I woke up in the middle of the night and catch myself profusely sweating along with my heartbeat hammering against my chest. I try to control my ragged breathing and lower my heart rate.

*“\*Are you okay, Senkyo?\*”*

*“\*…Y-Yeah, It’s nothing.\*”*

Ryosei’s called out to me in my head. He’s concerned for me but I quickly reassure him. I woke up from a nightmare. It’s been a while since I had these. I can still remember clearly that my very first one was about my dad passing away. A fiery inferno was all around me and the building I was in was about to collapse. It was hard to breathe from all the smoke; I was losing oxygen by the second. Despite that, I stayed looking for him. I eventually find him, and at that point, anything could happen. The building would collapse, we would get buried in rubble, engulfed in flames, or maybe even lose our breath, but there was always one outcome. His death.

However, compared to my first nightmare, the one I just had was nothing like it. A pitch-black space with nothing but emptiness. My body was the only thing that reflected light in my eyes. I walked forward with no clear goal, and in that silence, a single sentence echoed.

*“\*You are not human.\*”*

That single sentence repeated again, and again, and again, and again, and again without pause, continuously, perpetually, incessantly, ceaselessly, endlessly. I could do nothing to stop it. I tried to run away as fast as I could, but the sound didn’t diminish. It stayed in a static state, like a broken record I was forced to listen to. I was already suffering, pressing my hands against my ears as hard as I could to dampen the sound as much as I can. It was a futile effort, and to make things worse, the root cause of this nightmare showed up. Fulgur, showing me his gory state, impaling me with a terrifying sense of foreboding.

I got this fear two weeks ago when Freda-san and I talked by ourselves. I was given the choice to hear what she had to say, and in my pursuit of strength, I carelessly chose to continue. Our conversation was still clear in my head.

**…………**

“Very well, if that is your choice. Do you know about the Konjou Clan’s stories about The Dual Wielder?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“The Dual Wielder is a folk tale that originated in the clan about 22 years ago. It is a story about a young boy that possesses the power to simultaneously use mana and spirit power. It grated him immense strength that brought harmony to all three worlds. But at the end of his journey, he was unable to control his power, which lead to inevitable death.”

My eyes widen when I heard this story. Since the only person I knew that could use both mana and spirit power simultaneously… was me. I didn’t tell the clan, but I used to do some self-training at home to explore my limits and what I could do. One of those discoveries is that I can use mana and spirit power simultaneously. Additionally, I don’t need a spectral like Kuro Yaiba to be able to use mana. It surprised both me and Ryosei, but there was no denying the truth.

“The true face of this story is a prophecy made by one of the last heroes.”

“Heroes? What are those?”

“After the gods divided Primo, their power was not enough to sustain a complete severance, and dimensional rifts began to appear. Many were taken by these rifts and forcefully sent to one of the other worlds. As a result, many died and were treated as monsters. In Earth’s case, otherworlders were labeled demons, witches, beasts, the list goes on. So the gods decided to connect the three worlds by sending ambassadors to each world. They would choose a group of five and bless them with godly weapons to defend themselves. Ambassadors of Earth were called Heroes, those of Zerid were called Hfixesi, and those of the Spirit Realm were called Di Manes. Returning to our topic, one of the last heroes used their godly power to tell a prophecy.”

“And that prophecy is ‘The Dual Wielder?’”

“…That is my suspicion.”

“Huh? A suspicion? Wasn’t that what you were going to tell me?”

“I was indeed going to relay you a prophecy, but the one I know of is told differently.”

“Told differently? Does that mean ‘The Dual Wielder’ is the same as your prophecy?”

“That is what I am led to believe. After comparing the two texts, they are almost no different from each other. I suspect the prophecy was told differently as it was passed down, resulting in The Dual Wielder.”

“Then, can I please hear your version?”

“Very well. The prophecy goes like this, ‘Born from the thirst of power, he holds the gift of the three masteries. His wish heralds the flag of harmony. The commander of tranquility thirsts for power. Attaining such strength marks the beginning, and reaching its heights is the prelude to his fall.’”

I try to compare The Dual Wielder and Freda-san’s prophecy as she tells it. The ideas were indeed the same, but a line that caught me was, “the ability to use mana and spirit power” from The Dual Wielder and “the three masteries” from Freda’s prophecy didn’t fit. I was about to bring it up with her immediately, but she beat me to it like she knew what I was thinking.

“At first, I disregarded this as ‘the three masteries’ depicts three powers and ‘the power to use mana and spirit power’ only shows two. However, I recently discovered concrete proof that the Konjou clan and Zerid were once connected, making The Dual Wielder and the prophecy more than likely to be true. If we assume that is the case, then I theorize that you, the dual wielder, have untapped power that we have yet to discover—the third mastery.”

I start to feel anxious trying to continue this topic. If both of these stories are the same one, and if the hero of these stories really is me… then that means my life was set to go down this direction 22 years ago. And… if I continue to go down this path, then I will die.

I always thought that dying is just a part of life. If I walk this path then I’m just dying earlier than normal. It is an inevitable end for all of us, which is probably why I was so accepting of this dangerous path. I’m not scared of dying, as long as I live my life to the fullest, may it be from a battle or a natural death, I can imagine myself accepting it without any regrets because it was the path I chose…

But why is my heart aching? Why am I going against my own beliefs? Was I only trying to fool myself? If I’m worried about my death now, then back in our fight with Fulgur, the words I said, the emotions I felt, the courage I gathered, and the resolve I showed, were all of it caused by the heat of the moment. Was it was all fake?

I was already going down a rocky path. I couldn’t even trust myself anymore. I thought I knew everything about myself from both inside and out. I think it was my true emotions when I said I wanted to know more about myself. I said I was prepared to go down this dangerous road for it, but Freda-san’s next words made me realize.

“Now, Yukou-san, I have been waiting for you. I will recite encrypted messages for you. If you are truly The Dual Wielder, then this will allow you to unlock your true potential. Obtaining these powers will not be a simple task, which is why I need you to accept a single fact. You are not human.”

My mind stopped functioning. “You are not human,” she says. After watching countless anime about protagonists being revealed as non-human, I always thought that I would react differently. If someone told me I wasn’t human, then that doesn’t change that I’m still a living being. Someone that expresses emotions and moves forward to live. Then why is this haunting me? What is holding me back from accepting the truth?

“You are a superior being that will save the three worlds, so there is no need to—”

“STOP!”

My mind was a mess. I couldn’t hold myself back. I felt like if I kept listening to what she was about to say, my heart would be broken to pieces, so I inadvertently let out a frustrated yell. I didn’t even notice that I jumped out of my seat and slammed the table. Freda-san stared at me blankly, clearly nonplussed. It took me a while to realize what I did. I regained my senses but I didn’t say a word, and neither did she. I bow to her to apologize and quickly take my leave. I left in silence, but my actions speak volumes about my panic.

**…………**

*“\*Senkyo…\*”*

Ryosei called out to me. I didn’t say a word, but he can sense that I’m not feeling the least bit okay. I didn’t want to continue feeling like this. I look over to my alarm clock and see that it was still 3 in the morning. I need to go back to sleep for school later, I know that, yet I stay awake. I didn’t want to see that dream again.

“Can you cover for me?”

*“\*Hahh… Sure. But I won’t be doing this tomorrow.\*”*

“Got it. Thanks.”

I asked Ryosei to use his spirit power to restore my energy so that I don’t have to sleep. We agreed that he would only do this in emergencies since sleeping is always healthier, but I guess he sees this as one. I’m really lucky to have him.

**…………**

It was Tuesday morning. The weather was calm, but it was noticeably getting hotter by the day. While Senkyo was on his way to school, he saw Kinro walking in front of him. He entered a quick jog to catch up to him, and as he was about to tap his shoulder…

“Yo, Kinro—Whoa!?”

“S-Senkyo! Help me!”

He turned around the second he heard Senkyo’s voice and grabbed hold of both of his shoulders. He seemed incredibly desperate as he stared intensely at him.

“…You need help studying? Look man, you really scared me. I thought it was something serious.”

“This is serious! I’m struggling to keep up on math and science to the point where I don’t even understand what language our teacher is speaking!”

“Calm down. He was still speaking Japanese, I assure you.”

“How can I calm down? I’ve been studying all night but I can’t even remember half of what I read! Not to mention it’s the end-of-term exams next week! Come on, man, help me out here!”

Senkyo and Kinro were a week away from the end-of-term exams of their first term. In other words, the last hurdle before summer vacation was right around the corner. At this time, there were two types of people: ones that are confident in their academic ability, and ones that are on edge about the incoming storm. Senkyo and Kinro were perfect examples of those two.

“Oh yeah, I guess I should worry a bit.”

“That! That attitude right there! It annoys me so much but I need someone like you to teach me now, SO PLEASE TEACH ME!!!”

“W-WHOA, WHOA, WHOA, C-CALM DOWN!!”

Kinro began shaking Senkyo back and forth, so much so that he felt like he was going to hurl. If it wasn’t for his recent training he might have just done so. Fearing for his life, he reluctantly accepted his request.

“Then it's settled! The library after school. Got it! See ya then!”

After their little interaction on their way to school, the two talked about their schedules on their way to the classroom. Both of them were available in the afternoon, so they decided to hold their tutor session as soon as possible.

Kinro left cheerily, humming a happy tune all the while. His attitude was completely different from earlier. It showed just how much he trusted Senkyo’s ability to teach. Moving on from his sudden job request, Senkyo headed for his seat.

“Good morning, Yukou-san!”

“Oh, good morning, Yutei-san.”

He was immediately greeted by Yukai the moment he got there. Senkyo saw that she was in high spirits again. Lately, she was livelier than usual. When it comes to interacting with other classmates, helping them with schoolwork, and even when she gets invited for lunch, acted happier and even a little more selfish. However, her amount of change was still at the level where most people wouldn’t notice anything different about her. She was still meek and doesn’t initiate interactions. She was only beginning to change, and Senkyo noticed that. He also knew the cause for this, and that was his friend, Ryosei.

“It’s good to know you and Ryosei are getting along.”

“O-Oh… Um, y-yes! I… really appreciate his company. I’d like you to tell him that!”

“He can hear you loud and clear.”

“R-Really!? T-Then, thank you!”

Yukai quickly bowed to Senkyo and turned away in embarrassment. Although this is how she usually acted in school, Senkyo wasn’t used to it anymore. He could remember it clearly…

Ever since Freda taught Ryosei how to enter the spirit world, he had been exploring it, trying to figure out how the world functioned as well as what was causing his connection with Yukai. So far, he only discovered one organization-like body in the spirit world, and that was Savor Soul. It was the perfect place to begin his investigation, but he didn’t go there. In fact, Ryosei did his best to avoid the place as much as possible.

This was what he wanted. Even though he already had a lead, Ryosei decided to throw it away. That was because he wanted to protect Yukai. He could tell the café wasn’t doing anything wrong to their human staff since he always checked Yukai’s health every time she returned from her part-time job. But to be on the safe side, he didn’t want the café to learn that one of their human staff has a unique connection with a spirit.

He thought a relationship between humans and spirits wasn’t looked down upon, at the very least, it wasn’t abhorred at that café. It was a café that served humans after all. His reason was simpler. Overprotectiveness. He was worried to death when he first lost Yukai’s flame. At first, he thought it was because other spirits did something to her because they discovered she was connected to him. If Ryosei angers a spirit, they might attack Yukai instead to get his attention. This is why he decided to leave her alone… when searching the spirit realm at least.

*“\*No! I refuse! Wasn’t it you who said you’ll stay by my side? No breaking promises!\*”*

When Ryosei told Yukai about the situation, she flatly declined, quite aggressively at that. It was the side of Yukai that she would never show anyone else. When she’s around Ryosei, she would be more selfish and expressive of her emotions.

*“\*Change… huh.\*”*

Senkyo looked around the whole classroom. He first spots Itsuki who was strangely reviewing his notes for the next class. Usually, he would just sit there with a bored expression. Ever since he finished his first mission, he began studying more diligently. He wasn’t putting as much time into studying as other students, but it was a surprise nonetheless. The whole class was in awe when they saw him reviewing, even until now.

A few seats over he saw Sora, who was reading his notes with a stern expression. Before, he always got frustrated with studying and gave up halfway. He probably did most of his studying at home since he has over-average grades. The reason for this was quite clear in Senkyo’s head. He wanted to ace next week’s tests… or so people would think. In reality, the source of his determination came from the empty seat right beside Sora. It was the seat that Touma was previously assigned to. Sora told Senkyo everything about what happened on the night they fought and requested him to leave Touma alone. Naturally, he agreed. After suffering that defeat and accepting it all, Senkyo suspected he wanted to make use of most of his free time outside of school to train and improve his technique.

There was a great deal of change around him within the past week. Putting aside the technical sides, all of this change began because got caught in the supernatural.

*\*Is this the effect of entering a different environment, or is it the result of gaining experiences?\**

Senkyo thought to himself. He wasn’t sure about the answer either, but there was one thing he was certain about.

*\*I’m changing…\**

Senkyo’s train of thought was broken when the homeroom teacher showed up and announced themselves. He tried his best to focus on class and put his worries at the back of his head.

Lunchbreak arrived. Kinro invited Senkyo to eat at the cafeteria like always, but today was different. Since Senkyo woke up early due to his nightmare, he prepared a lunch box for himself. After parting ways with Kinro, he headed to the rooftop with his lunch on hand. He arrived at his destination and made his way to the place he sat last time. When he turned the corner, he was surprised to find someone else had taken his secret spot.

“Y-Yukou-senpai…?”

“Hisho-chan?”

It was Yuu. Senkyo stopped and saw her frozen in time with a piece of chicken before her open mouth. After a few seconds pass, she took a bite of her chicken before explaining herself.

“Oh, it was just you. I got scared for a second! I thought it was a teacher coming to check!”

“…Well, it was just me. Wait, no, why did you prioritize your food over me!?”

“The food was getting cold! It was telling me to eat before it did!”

She then took another bite.

“Wow, I never knew you loved food to this extent. I feel like I’m being brushed away here!”

“That wasn’t what I meant to do! Y-You’re here to eat your lunch, right? Come on, sit down.”

Yuu patted the space beside her, urging him to take his break. He walked over and opened his lunch box, revealing a well-balanced meal with meat, fruits, and vegetables.

“Whoa! Your lunch is so colorful!”

Senkyo could see the sparkle in her eyes as she examined his lunch box.

“I think this is normal. I just added more than usual and arranged them a bit. I woke up early so I was a bit bored. After that, this happened.”

“You make it sound so easy! S-So this is what’s normal in this world… how frightening. My lunch box is nowhere near as good as yours.”

Yuu’s lunch box only had chicken and rice beside each other. It was a plain lunch box without any design like Senkyo’s.

“There’s no need to think like that! This is just something I tried out because I didn’t have anything else to do anyway. As long as you have enough food in your lunch, I’d say it’s great! Decorating it like this is just a bit extra.”

“But you said yours was normal.”

“Normal as in no shaped cut-outs or character decorations! I’m sure most people would think your lunch is normal when they don’t have those! Like I said, decoration is just extra. I bet everyone’s lunch would be the same as yours if they’re short on time, mine included.”

“Is that so… Then you don’t think my lunch is weird?”

“No, not at all! You’re like any other student here.”

Senkyo was worried about Yuu. She told him a little about her past before. She was shunned by her classmates because she was different. She may have developed a slight trauma from that, which is why he was trying his best to reassure her.

“Thank you, Senpai. By the way, do you come here often?”

“Not really. This is my second time eating here. I don’t usually make my own lunch, so you wouldn’t really find me anywhere else but in the cafeteria. How about you? Didn’t you eat with Ichika-chan?”

“That was the plan, but Watanabe-senpai forgot his lunch box so Ichika-san went to give it to him. She said she would eat with him for today. She invited me to join them but I’m not good with Watanabe-senpai.”

“Do you hate him?”

“No, it’s not like that! It’s just… he can be a bit aggressive and the only time I talked alone with him was when we were training for the battle royale. I think it’ll just be awkward if I go.”

“Is that so? That’s understandable.”

“It is?”

“Well, I don’t really hang out with other people but Kinro and you. I trained with Watanabe-san and sometimes Yamamoto-san, but I wouldn’t say we’ve hung out. I think we see each other as friends, companions at the very least. But if you put me in the same situation, I’d do the same as you.”

“…Really? Hehe, it looks like we’re alike, Senpai. I haven’t hung out with anyone besides Ichika-san and you.”

“Haha, seems like it. But the only reason we started hanging out was because of you, remember? Your ‘Yukou-senpai Guard Duty?’”’

“Nnn~! That’s your fault, Senpai! If only you took care of yourself more!”

“I told you I’d be fine, right? Nothing attacked us, see?”

“Yeah, something did! Did you forget about the hollowed knights already?”

“Nah, that one doesn’t count. We WENT to it, so that means we still haven’t been attacked yet.”

“Stop trying to make excuses! If we were attacked, then it counts!”

Senkyo and Yuu continued their bickering as they ate their lunches. It took them a while, but they eventually calmed down. The bright blue sky overlooked their small talk as they spoke in between bites. The sun was blasting its blazing heat but the rooftop bulkhead protected them with its tiny shadow. It was noon so there was barely a shadow to coat them, which meant that the two had to sit closer than normal. Despite their close proximity, neither of them seemed to mind. They simply talked merrily as time passed and their lunch boxes went empty.

The afternoon came and classes were over. Senkyo waited for Kinro outside the classroom while he was giving one of his other friends a quick tutor about the last class. Senkyo was amazed at how good Kinro is at every subject besides math and science.

*“\*Well, everybody has their weakness. I guess Kinro’s is just calculations.\*”*

While he was watching Kinro through the window, Yukai announced her departure as she passed by him.

“I’ll be going now. See you tomorrow, Yukou-san!”

“Yeah, see you then!”

*\*I could’ve teased Ryosei if he were here.\**

Whenever Senkyo was at school, Ryosei would be out in the spirit world. However, every time, before he returns to Senkyo’s house, he stops by to check on Yukai. Senkyo knew he does it out of the kindness of his heart since he can sense his emotions. He doesn’t think of Yukai as a love interest, but that’s what makes him teasable for Senkyo.

“Yukou-senpai, are you ready to go?”

Yuu arrived and called out to Senkyo. She came to accompany him at training like always. However, today was different.

“Huh? Oh, sorry. I forgot to tell you; my training for the next two weeks is canceled. They said I need to focus on the upcoming tests.”

After hearing that, Yuu showed a dissatisfied face.

“You should reaaally work on relaying things like that next time.”

“Yeaaah… sorry about that. I even had a chance to tell you that earlier. It completely slipped my mind.”

She heaved a light sigh as she heard his response.

“Well then, are you going home?”

“Oh, not yet. Kinro is asking me to tutor him for the tests next week.”

“Tutoring? I know you’re smart, Senpai, but does that include academics?”

“Well, I’m average on everything.”

Senkyo’s answer left Yuu in a bit of a bind. Her confused face says it all, “Should you be teaching if your grades are only average?” was written on her expression. And the one to save her from her confused state wasn’t Senkyo. It was Kinro.

“Don’t be fooled by his grades!”

“Oh, good afternoon, Honjou-senpai.”

“Nice to see you, Hisho-chan.”

After a brief exchange of greetings, Yuu picked up the conversation. Evidently, he piqued her curiosity.

“What was it about Yukou-senpai’s grades?”

“Ah, yes. This guy is faking his grades! I wouldn’t say he’s purposely getting the answers wrong, he just doesn’t try! He only listens in class and doesn’t study at home, even for tests like next week! He’ll just sit back watching his anime and still end up with average grades! All he needs is a quick read and he’ll be able to understand it! It’s insane!”

Yuu immediately turns to Senkyo, looking to confirm if what he was saying was true. As a response, he stays silent for a while with his eyes wandering around the place. He was obviously trying to think of an excuse, but Yuu’s piercing gaze was too much for him. So he let out a sigh that signaled his defeat and sated the itch coming from his head.

“Fine, I might have done that in the past…”

Senkyo immediately switches his sights from Yuu to Kinro.

“I thought I told you to keep quiet about that!?”

“O-Oh, you did? Teehee~!”

“Don’t ‘teehee’ me! Hey!”

“Fine, fine, I’m sorry! But I thought it would be fine if Hisho-chan heard it, right? Look, no one’s even around us. They already left.”

Senkyo turned back to Yuu, worried she took it the wrong way as a sign of distrust. He was surprised to see that instead of distrust, he saw Yuu silently staring at the ground. It seems like she was thinking of something.

“Uhm, Hisho-chan? Is something wrong?”

“O-Oh, no it’s nothing!”

“Really?”

The tables have turned completely. Earlier, it was Senkyo who was trying to hide something and Yuu who was peering for answers, but now it was the other way around.

“Y-Yukou-senpai? What are you…?”

“No, it just seems like you wanted something from me. But, if you insist there’s nothing wrong, then I guess I’ll just have to leave it at that…”

Senkyo was trying to pressure Yuu by feigning ignorance. Yuu noticed that, but she couldn’t help but twist her face when Senkyo began slowly walking away. She was about to break. All she needed was one more push.

“…Then, I guess I’ll see you after the exams. You don’t need to come here—”

“W-WAIT!”

Yuu let out a loud yell, stopping Senkyo in his tracks. He slowly turned around pretending to be surprised, but he was immediately compromised when both Yuu and Kinro saw a grin on his face. Yuu’s face was bright red with her hands clutching the hem of her uniform. She couldn’t help but feel ashamed by playing right into his hands, but there was no going back now.

“…C-Can you… also teach me?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

He immediately answered her like he was expecting this. From the start, he had a feeling she wanted to ask but still played around with her.

“Uuugh! Yukou-senpai, you meanie!”

And so, Yuu joined Senkyo and Kinro in their study session. Everything should’ve been fine, however…

“Ugh, There are so many people…”

Senkyo scanned the library from its entrance and saw the crowd of students scattered throughout the library. They were all studying for the upcoming tests this coming week. There were students from various classes and year levels, that included some of Senkyo’s classmates.

He grimaced just thinking about what would happen when people see an average-scoring student like him teaching an above-average student like Kinro. Both Kinro and Yuu took notice of Senkyo’s distress. It was clear earlier that he didn’t want anyone to know he was actually quite capable in academics. So, Kinro took the initiative.

“It looks a bit too crowded in here. I probably won’t be able to focus. Say, do you two want to come to my place?”

The other two turned to him before sharing their thoughts.

“Your place huh… I haven’t been there in a while. I’m fine with it as long as Hisho-chan is.”

“I’m okay with it. I’m a bit nervous, though. Hopefully I don’t do something wrong.”

“You’ll be fine, don’t worry. My parents are nice people. I’m sure you’ll feel comfortable in no time!”

The three left the school and made their way to Kinro’s house. It only took a few minutes of walking before they reached it, and unlike Kinro’s princely looks, his house was just like any other.

“I’m home!”

Kinro unlocked the door to his house and announced his arrival.

“Come on in.”

He waited by the door to welcome the two in and closed the door behind them. Senkyo casually entered and set foot inside while Yuu timidly followed behind.

“Excuse me!”

“…E-Excuse me.”

As everyone was taking their shoes off, a woman appears from the other room.

“Oh! Is that Senkyo I hear? Welcome, welcome. It’s been a while since you last visited. How have you been?”

“Hello there, Mrs. Honjou. I’ve been a bit busy recently, but I’m doing fine. We just came to study since the school library was packed. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Oh no, not at all! I should be thanking you for taking care of Kinro for me. His grades have gone up since the last time you came to tutor him… Oh, and this is?”

Kinro’s mother spots Yuu who was standing behind Senkyo the whole time. Yuu jumped nervously when she realized she was called out. She came out of hiding to introduce herself.

“I-I am Hisho Yuu, a 1st year of Honshou Academy. N-Nice to meet you…”

It was clear to Kinro’s mother that Yuu was the shy type. She didn’t mind that. She even showed a smile to support that fact, but that smile implied more than just support. To her, there were more important topics to get into.

“Ooh! I didn’t know you got yourself a cute girlfriend! Way to go!”

“WHAT!?”

“…!?!?!”

Out of the three friends, Senkyo was the only one that shouted in surprise. His mouth was agape from her shocking statement. Meanwhile, Yuu was too dumbstruck to even function properly. She just stood there with rosy cheeks and stared intensely at the ground, avoiding all eye contact. On the other hand, Kinro simply stood on the sidelines with a huge grin on his face. It was the perfect time for him to tease them.

“Hahaha! See? I told you, you were being too obvious! Even my mom could tell at first sight!”

“What do you mean!? We aren’t even like that! What even gave you that crazy idea, Ms. Honjou!? Was it Kinro!? No, it has to be! You…!”

Senkyo turned to Kinro who was wearing a smug face as he watched the scene unfold before him. However, before Senkyo could even do anything, Kinro’s mother cleared everything up.

“No, it was nothing like that. It was just a woman’s intuition~!”

“W-Well if that’s the case, then you’re wrong! Hisho-chan and I aren’t dating! And another thing, isn’t that something you say to your own son!?”

“It’s a woman’s intuition. I mean, if a shy girl wanted to hide behind someone, it would be someone they’re most comfortable with, no? And with how close you two were, I thought just maybe… something is afoot!”

“H-Huh? I… no! T-That may be so, but it doesn’t mean we’re in a relationship!”

“Hmm, maybe not. Honestly, I just wanted to tease you a bit. But with those reactions… Oh, how rude of me! I’m keeping you here for too long. Here, Senkyo, you two can go on ahead to Kinro’s room. He’ll bring up the snacks before you kids start studying.”

“N-No, that’s…”

Senkyo tried to stop advancing any further. Unfortunately for him, everyone in the household was against him.

“Gladly! You two can wait in my room. I just need to help my mom a bit!”

“Kinroooo!!”

“Take care, you two!”

After the coordinated double team from the Honjou family, Senkyo and Yuu were left with no choice but to go to Kinro’s room by themselves. Yuu was dead silent the whole time she was following Senkyo to Kinro’s room. She didn’t dislike the situation; she just couldn’t produce words after breaking down from all the teasing she received.

Senkyo opened the door annoyedly and dropped himself in front of the coffee table in the middle of the room. Yuu stood by the door, amazed at how carefree he was being in another person’s room. She gently closed the door behind her and sat on the other side of the table opposite to Senkyo. While she was collecting her thoughts, he spoke to her in an apologetic tone.

“Sorry about that Hisho-chan. Their teasing can get out of hand.”

“Oh, I-Its fine.”

“Yeah right. I guess shutting down in the middle of a conversation is normal for you?”

“…W-Well, I was a bit troubled. More importantly, Senpai, you really are close to Honjou-senpai and even his family. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him act like that in school.”

“Yeah, they’re good people. It’s been about 4 years since I met Kinro. The first time I visited his house was in our last year of middle school. I still had a bit of my edge at the time so I was a little rude to his parents. Hahh… thinking about it again is making me cringe. But thankfully, everyone here was kind enough to look over that. After that a lot of things happened and, well, now we’re like this.”

“Wow, I never would’ve thought. So you’re the type to have fewer friends but closer relationships.”

“I think so. How about you?”

“I’m… not so sure. I think it’s a bit early to tell. I don’t have someone that I’ve been friends with for too long. Ichika-san was my first one, but I only met her at the start of the year.”

“Hm? Is that so? You know, I would think about the quality of the relationship rather than how long it is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when you meet a person for the first time and get along with them, you share some laughs, have fun together, get comfortable being around each other, they don’t have any bad influences on you, and you don’t have any bad influences on them, I think that’s enough to say it’s a good relationship. Then, let’s say that relationship deteriorates. Maybe you had a fallout, you two discover something about each other neither of you likes or maybe they’re pushing you away and the good times end there, it doesn’t change the past. You had a good time with them. You enjoyed each other’s company. You can just leave that good-quality relationship in the past as good memories. But what I think forges the greatest relationship is when you two can repair it no matter what happens. Through thick and thin, the good or the bad, if your relationship stays strong, then I don’t think it's necessary to consider how long it’s been, right? Well, at least that’s what I think.”

After Senkyo finally finishes saying his piece, he noticed the silence looming around the both of them. Yuu was staring at Senkyo, her eyes glistening in awe and her mouth slightly agape. It was then realized just how sappy and embarrassing his lines were. In an attempt to escape her silent judgment, he directs his gaze to the door, hoping Kinro finally enters to break the atmosphere and save him, but then, Yuu spoke in a soft and reserved tone.

“Then… what do you think of relationships made out of lies?”

Senkyo turned back to Yuu, a spark of light illuminating his mortified eyes. It seems that she was interested in the conversation after all. Thinking this, he responds to her adamantly.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“…”

Sensing she was looking for more answers, he expounded.

“If it's made with lies, then the truth will surely break it. What happens next depends on both parties. Whether they can accept those lies and if both of them desire to repair what they’ve lost, or maybe even if only one side repairs it to make it up to the other person, then surely, it would be a great relationship. Though it probably won’t be the same as normal, maybe in some circumstances it will. Hey, what do I know? Human relationships are hard, and I definitely don’t have a degree in this. I’m just spouting a bunch of nonsense hahaha…”

“I don’t think so.”

“Huh?”

Just as Senkyo was trying to hide his embarrassment with a self-deprecating comment, Yuu silences him.

“I think that’s a beautiful ideology. I love it!”

“…”

The silence around them turned into allure. Yuu’s smile was bright and radiant, reflecting the very happiness in her soul with this one expression. It was like a mirror, letting him peer through the other side, giving shape to raw emotions. He couldn’t help but be drawn in by her honest personality. People always have walls around them, not letting anyone see their raw emotions, and keeping some form of distance between each other. The same goes for Yuu. But at that very moment, that wall disappeared, giving Senkyo a glimpse of her true self. Seeing as she did it so naturally, with not a hint of forcefulness, hiding no ulterior motives, and doing it just to clearly express herself to him. It was no wonder that Senkyo was captivated by it.

Two knocks came from the door, making Yuu turn to it, breaking her expression, and in turn, cutting off Senkyo’s trance. It was followed by Kinro’s voice with a flippant tone.

“Hey, it’s okay for me to open the door, right?”

Senkyo directed him a sharp glare. If those were enough to cut somebody up, Kinro would already be minced into small, tiny pieces. That was just how furious he was that his deep revere was cut short due to him. It was so powerful that Kinro backed up a bit, realizing he made a mistake, he turned his volume down into a meek tone.

“I-I am very sorry for the intrusion… H-Here, some snacks for you…”

Kinro slowly entered the room, trying his best to stand strong against Senkyo’s glare, and placed a tray of snacks and tea on the table. Realizing there was nothing that could be done, Senkyo let out a sigh, took out his notes, and quickly read through them. He needed a bit of time to review everything before tutoring anyone. Kinro and Yuu studied by themselves until Senkyo was ready. After a little bit over 30 minutes, the three’s study session finally began.

Kinro and Yuu had their brows furrowed the whole time they were studying by themselves but it slowly dissipated when Senkyo started teaching them. They spent the rest of the afternoon immersed in their studies. They wouldn’t have noticed it was getting late if it weren’t for the darkness dimming their surroundings and hindering their vision to keep studying.

The three cut their studies short and packed their bags before it got too late. Senkyo and Yuu said their farewells while Kinro saw them off. Dusk had arrived and the streets were under the twilight sky by the time the two left the Honjou household.

“Th-That was hard. I can’t anymore, I’m tired. Why do you look like you’re fine after all that, Senpai?”

“I don’t know. This isn’t the first time I tutored someone so maybe I got used to it?”

“Uuu… I wish I was like that.”

“Well, whatever the case, we’re still going back tomorrow to finish the rest of the study material. Go get some rest but don’t slack off, okay?”

“Yes, Teacher.”

Kinro and Yuu have yet to understand the rest of the lessons on their worst subjects, so they decided to continue the remaining lessons tomorrow. Senkyo was the teacher of this group so he had to act like one. But the more he did, the more he cringed after hearing each line he spoke echoing in his head. They did quite a bit of mental damage to him since he knew he was being a hypocrite. He never studied for tests unless it was for teaching someone. Telling someone to spend time studying for themselves to get high grades without himself even doing so was biting on his conscience.

“You know, you can stick to calling me ‘Senpai.’ I don’t like the sound of being called a teacher.”

“If that’s what you want, then I don’t mind, Senpai.”

“Thanks. By the way, your apartment is in town, right? Maybe I can walk you there this time.”

“You don’t need to go out of your way. I can take care of myself you know.”

Yuu scowled at Senkyo, making him shrink back a little. She obviously took his intentions the wrong way, so he quickly explained himself.

“N-No, you’ve got it wrong. I was just planning to buy some stuff at the grocery store so I thought I might as well offer you… but if you don’t want to, that’s completely fine too!”

Yuu’s mood quickly shifted and her eyes brightened. She faced Senkyo energetically almost as if the study session earlier didn’t faze her at all.

“Then how about going together instead? I was planning to do the same thing!”

“O-Oh, what a coincidence. Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Hooray! Hey, Senpai, how about showing me which vegetables you used in your lunch box earlier? I want to make something like that too!”

“Hahaha, you sure are fired up. Okay but picking them isn’t good enough, you know? You actually have to cook them.”

“That’s rude! I know how to cook! I just don’t remember the name of the vegetables is all.”

“Seriously? How did you even last this long here?”

“Well, I mostly only eat meat but… You know what, that doesn’t matter now! I’m a vampire so I can live without vegetables.”

“…”

“H-Hey! What are you looking at me with sympathetic eyes for!? I’m telling the truth here!”

Senkyo placed his hand on her shoulder, his eyes glinted, and one side of his mouth curved into a half-smile. Then, he followed with a mocking remark.

“Look, Hisho-chan. Being picky isn’t good for you. Even I eat almost anything.”

“STOP IIIIIIIT!!!”

The two continued bickering and entertaining themselves as they shopped together for the night. The hours flew by and the two parted for the night and headed to their homes.

The next day. Senkyo was on his way to school when Kinro walked up to him. Unlike yesterday, his face was just like the morning sun, bright, cheery, and exorcised of all his worries. He went with a spring in his step followed by a pat on Senkyo’s back.

“Yo! Good morning Senkyo!”

“You seem really happy today.”

“Of course, I am! All thanks to you. At this rate, I’ll have nothing to worry about. I’m counting on you later as well.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. I don’t mind tutoring you but you won’t have me forever, you know?”

“I’m working on it. You’ll see! I won’t even need your help on the next tests.”

Senkyo shifts his eyes in the other direction as he replies in a snarky tone.

“Sure… Good luck on that one.”

“Hey! You don’t look like you believe me at all! You even looked away!”

“No, it must be your imagination. I was just looking at the birds.”

Senkyo turned back to Kinro. Unexpectedly, instead of a slightly annoyed expression, he was peering at him. It was only for a second, but he was undoubtedly scrutinizing his face. Senkyo was sure of this.

“…Then I guess that’s fine. So? Have you read any books lately?”

*\*This guy…\**

“Only a few. I don’t have much time anymore.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

Senkyo paused for a bit before responding.

“…I’m training, remember? I told you before.”

“Ah, yeah, I think you said that. So what’s this all about? Surely you aren’t training for no reason, right?”

He stared at the ground, avoiding contact with Kinro’s eyes.

“It’s… kendo training. Nothing much.”

“Really? Is that why you always have that thing around you?”

Kinro pointed at the shinai bag hanging on the same shoulder Senkyo was carrying his bag. Kinro added.

“But didn’t you say that was for your friend?”

“Oh, that… That was a lie. I was just a bit shy to admit it at first, but I took a bit of a liking to it.”

Senkyo answered casually. The story he made up was to explain why he always had a shinai bag on him. But now he was exposing that lie to make it seem like the truth.

“You were shy, huh? Come on, you know you didn’t have to worry about me.”

“Are you being serious right now? I can already imagine you teasing me about this.”

“Hmm, you’re not wrong.”

“See!?”

“Hahaha, well is that so, then why are you telling me this now?”

“You’re worried, aren’t you? I bet you saw my face when you were coming up to me.”

“As sharp as ever.”

Earlier that day, Senkyo had another untimely wake due to the same nightmare from yesterday. He was more than aware of his mood but he didn’t expect Kinro to catch on immediately.

Kinro is great at reading the mood. It was probably something he picked up from getting popular. He knew how to read the people swarming around him, which is probably why he was even better at reading his best friend.

Senkyo didn’t need to reveal his lie, but it was his precaution. Now that Kinro was getting slightly concerned, there was a chance that he would stick his nose out where it’s not supposed to be. He might try to find a way to help but end up caught in his supernatural business. Endangering Kinro was something he wanted to avoid, and so he sacrificed his lie for another one closer to the truth, but also one that would relieve his worries, even for just a little bit.

“You don’t need to worry. I was just told by my mentor how terrible I was doing. Nothing to concern yourself over.”

“So that’s what happened. Well taking to account what you’ve been doing in the past, I’m sure you’re doing great. Chin up, you’ll get there at some point.”

“Sure, thanks. But you don’t need to worry about me too much. I’m more than capable of solving my problems by myself.”

“Heh, really now? Is that your way of telling me not to intrude in your personal life?”

“No, that’s not—”

Just as Senkyo was trying to explain himself, Kinro tapped the front of his shoulders with his knuckles and directed a smirk at him.

“Not happening. It’s not fair if you’re the only one that does it.”

Senkyo had his mouth agape from Kinro’s remark. He was a bit startled, but it wasn’t long until he snapped out of it with a tired sigh.

“Fine, I got it, do what you want. But still, I did *\*that\** for myself. You don’t need to keep worrying about it.”

“Then I guess I’m doing this for myself too. So you have no choice but to indulge me.”

Senkyo wore a troubled face as he scratched his head. It looks like his efforts were useless. Kinro declared that he would poke his nose into his troubles if he got the chance. Senkyo had no way of stopping him since he did the same thing in the past. Now his only choice was to make it so that he doesn’t find a need to bother him. Giving in to Kinro’s selfishness, he ended the subject with a single retort.

“I guess what I did just turned you into a selfish brat, huh?”

They ended their conversation about their unknown past and continued walking to school. Senkyo spent the rest of his morning listening carefully to the lessons like he always did. The time ticked away and the bell finally rang, signaling the start of lunch break.

Since Senkyo woke up early again, he was able to make himself lunch. He separated from Kinro and headed to the same spot he usually ate at—the rooftop. And on his way there, he had a thought that just couldn’t leave his mind.

*\*I wonder if Hisho-chan is there again.\**

He was reminded of the charming smile Yuu showed him yesterday. He couldn’t get his mind off it, he wanted to see it again, and so he opened the door to the rooftop and looked around in search of his underclassman. Seeing that nobody was around in front of the entrance, he closed the door and turn the corner of the bulkhead, and saw…

“…She’s not here. Well, she did say that she ate here just because Ichika-chan ate with Watanabe-san. He probably wouldn’t forget his lunch twice in a row.”

Just as he was thinking these thoughts, the door to the rooftop opened, and saw…

“Hey, what are you doing here?”

“A-A teacher!?”

“Hm? Why d’you sound so surprised? ‘Course, I’m a teacher. Didja think I was your girlfriend or somethin’?”

“Uhh…”

Senkyo buried his face in the palm of his hand to cover the disappointment and embarrassment that was leaking through it. This was his third time eating on the roof, no teachers came for him the first two times, why would he expect one on the third? Thoughts like that echoed in his head to excuse himself for getting into this strange situation. Unfortunately for him, the teacher that caught him wasn’t going to let him finish.

“Well, whatever the case, get out of here before I report you.”

“H-Huh? You’re just going to let me go?”

*\*This guy is pretty lax… Is this really okay?\**

Senkyo’s confusion was understandable. Normally, teachers would punish students that break rules, but for some reason, the person standing in front of him wasn’t like that. Thinking about it carefully, the teacher didn’t even sound furious when he first saw him here. In fact, he was talking casually the whole time in a relaxed tone.

“Look, escapin’ reality is normal for students nowadays. You were soo lonely that you came to eat here by yourself so that no one would see how pathetic your life is, I understand that. If I punished ya here, I’d be rubbin’ salt into the wound. Just accept my kindness and leave.”

“W-WHAT ARE YOU SAYING!? WHAT KIND OF TEACHER ARE YOU!?”

“What d’you mean?”

The teacher left Senkyo absolutely muddled. He threw all sorts of insults at him without holding anything back, in such a casual tone no less. If someone like this actually taught a class, it would be chaos. He could only stare at the teacher dumbfoundedly as he tried to collect himself. But unfortunately…

“Hm? Wait, aren’t you the guy that became the new wielder of Kuro Yaiba? Ahh, now that I said it that’s totally you.”

“HUH!?”

One surprise came after another. Senkyo let out a startled yell at the initial surprise, but he soon connected the dots and got a grip on the situation. The teacher just talked about Kuro Yaiba, something that no one would know except for the Konjou clan’s members. Which can only mean that the teacher in front of him was one of its members.

It all made sense now. There was no possible way someone like him would pass as a teacher. Not only was his attitude overgrown, but his black hair also grew so long that it was covering his left eye and he had to tie the back of his hair into a small ponytail. The white shirt under his black vest was unkempt and wrinkled with a few holes unbuttoned. His gaze sharpened on Senkyo and took a small piece of paper out of his black tie.

“Lucky me.”

He dropped the paper on the ground, releasing a blue light that shaped some kind of magic circle with what seemed to be Japanese kanji and various other shapes and patterns written on it.

“It’s a warding talisman. It prevents bystanders from coming here. It’s not as powerful as Reiko-sama’s barrier but it does its job as long as the rest stay oblivious to the talisman’s effect. You know what this means, right?”

Senkyo watched the man carefully and spotted blue ripples coming out of his hands using espy. A marking of a brute channeling kindled spirit power. Sensing his malicious intent, he immediately enhanced the lunch box in his hands and pulled it up to shield him from his incoming attack, but just before it all happened, Senkyo suddenly changed forms and used flash strike backward into the fence.

Senkyo and the man used flash strike at the exact same time. He managed to sustain the distance between them and watched the teacher punch through the air he previously stood on.

“Looks like you have the reaction time to cut it. But that won’t—”

The man’s speech was interrupted when a black circle unexpectedly appeared below him and shot out multiple chains that bound him on the ground.

“What the!?”

The man shouted in surprise, on the other hand, Senkyo curved his lips into a smile. Following the man’s binding, a creak resounded throughout the rooftop, indicating the door to the place opened. Once the door reached a reasonable angle, Senkyo turned in that direction, and saw…

“Are you alright, Senpai?”

“Yeah, thanks to you.”

His vampire underclassman, Hisho Yuu.

**…………**

“So, who is this guy, Senpai?”

“Dunno. I think he’s a member of the Konjou clan that works in the school. But one thing’s for sure, he isn’t a teacher.”

Senkyo and Yuu look at the man inquisitively, encouraging him to explain himself. He furrowed his brows showing his annoyed expression and clicked his tongue before answering their question.

“Is this how you treat your elders? I’m Hashimoto Haruto. As you handsomely deduced, I’m not a teacher here and I’m also a part of the clan. I manage the rooftop here and keep and maintain its functionality.”

“Hm? There’s nothing on this roof though…”

Yuu looked around to check as she pointed out the discrepancy in his words, and just as she remembered, the rooftop was certainly empty. Nothing that needs managing or anything that has functionality. Senkyo glared at him with his pupils flared.

“Hey, hey, calm down! Don’t jump to conclusions, I’m telling the truth here! You just don’t see it that’s why. Use poltergeist to lift up that tile at the corner over there and you’ll see I’m telling the truth.”

“Hisho-chan, can you watch him for me?”

“Got it.”

Senkyo walked up to the corner a few meters away from him. He used espy to check if there was any spirit power embedded in the tile but nothing showed up. Carefully, he placed his hands on the tile and noticed it was loose. He wanted to avoid following Haruto’s instructions as much as possible in case of a trap, but if it was a sensor-activated trap then it was better to execute it as fast as possible.

He used poltergeist to lift the tile to the sky, and at the same time, he used flash strike to get back as far as possible. Five seconds passed and nothing happened.

“J-Just what in the hell are you doing?”

Haruto lightly shook his head accompanied by rapid blinking as he stared at Senkyo in confusion. A genuine reaction that gave away whether there was actually a trap placed or not. Sensing it was safe to approach it, Senkyo walked up and saw a circle with various shapes and texts around it.

“This is… a teleportation circle!”

Underneath the floating tile laid a teleportation circle engraved in the cement.

“…”

But something looked wrong. The circle was too small for anyone to teleport on it. Senkyo took a closer look and before he was certain, but now there was no doubt about it. There were fewer symbols on the teleportation circle for it to function properly.

“You were saying you’re doing maintenance here, right? Then why are there fewer symbols on this circle than the others I’ve seen?”

“You’re really meticulous and it’s getting reaaaaally annoying.”

“Then how about starting by explaining everything before I ask the questions to make you?”

“We sure have a cocky new wielder on our hands… Look, this school is used as a second teleportation hub for the Konjou clan. In case of an attack on the clan or other emergency situations, hunters on the field will use this school to quickly get themselves there. Since we mostly operate within the town and places around it, this school, which is closest to the center of the town, is the best place our units can funnel in. The circle you’re looking at is just one part of a huge teleportation area, that being, this whole rooftop. Why do you think this roof has tiles despite banning students from entering it? In the first place, why did this school even ban students from coming here? There hasn’t been a single record of anyone dropping themselves from here since this was first built. To hide our secrets obviously! …And another thing, you didn’t really think school rooftops always looked clean, did you!? Leaves, trash, puddles, moss, this place was a mess before I got here! Every single goddamn day I clean this place just to make it look pretty for some stupid neat freak named Sakurai Kosuke! I did this y’know!? I did!”

Haruto told Senkyo and Yuu all about the real purpose of the school’s rooftop, and it was clear in their astonished faces that they weren’t expecting this, but then, partway through Haruto’s explanation abruptly turned to a tangent of him complaining about his job, as a result, the other two’s faces also turned from amazement to disappointment.

Senkyo and Yuu stared at the man silently as they processed his story. They didn’t know much about the school’s history, but it was certainly strange to install tiles on the roof that will never be used by students.

Senkyo walked up to the other corner close to them and examined it. It was loose just like the other tile and using poltergeist, it revealed another circle. It was the same size as the other one, but it had different symbols engraved in it. Thinking about it carefully, he remembered Freda mentioning that teleportation circles were a new technology that she developed only after meeting with the clan.

*\*There’s probably a lot to talk about if I ask about this, and I don’t trust this guy to be capable of actually teaching me anything. I’ll just ask Freda-san directly once the tests are over with. Everything he’s saying seems to be true, but still…\**

He placed the two tiles back in place and faced Haruto who was chained to the ground.

“Then why exactly did you attack me?”

As a response to Senkyo’s question, Haruto glared at him.

“You have some nerve asking me that question. Don’t tell me you already forgot who I am!?”

“What is this time? You’re Hashimoto Haruto, right? I can’t forget you if I haven’t met you before.”

“But you’ve obviously heard of me. Then w—”

“Nope, not at all.”

Haruto’s ill temper immediately subsided the moment he heard Senkyo’s curt response and began to stutter.

“N-No, that can’t be. Surely… Surely, your beautiful mentor talked about me, right?”

“Y-You’re talking about Shimizu-sensei, right…? Why did you say it like that are you some kind of creep? And no, she didn’t tell me anything about you.”

The new mentor that was assigned to Senkyo, Shimizu Yoshiko, one of Konjou Reiko’s apprentices and one of the judges of the previous battle royale that witnessed Senkyo’s true power. He has trained under her for 2 weeks now, and in those 2 weeks, he has never heard her speak of anyone.

Having the reality of the situation shown to Haruto was like someone slapping him with a fish across the face, so his soul attempted to ascend to the heavens to escape the mortifying situation he got himself into. Senkyo and Yuu simply eyeballed at him in pity as whatever he was going through was clearly something no human should experience. Seeing as he was mentally broken, Yuu released the chains and freed his restrictions, yet he kept kneeling like some kind of religious statue but instead of praying he made a perfect image of what a man would look like without a soul.

They waited a few minutes for Haruto’s soul to make a full recovery and snap himself out of his disoriented state. After collecting the power to move his mouth Haruto finally spoke.

“No… no, this can’t be…”

If Senkyo wasn’t wrong, this was the first stage of grief—denial. Unfortunately, he didn’t have the time to let him stay like this. So, he returned the favor of attacking him by hitting him on the head.

“Hey! Answer me if you don’t want me to report to the clan about this!”

“Hmph, do it. I don’t care.”

“Fine. I guess I’ll report this to Shizumu-sensei first.”

“Wh-What!? Hey! Don’t you dare do that!”

“Alright, then do you feel like explaining yourself yet?”

“Grr… Tsk.”

Haruto sucked in his anger and stood up to properly face Senkyo.

“As you should have known, I am Yoshiko-san’s destined partner. We are meant to be guided by the red strings of fate! But then, the past few days she’s only been talking about her teaching a shrimp like you. And now that I caught you myself, it was the perfect time for me to test if you are truly worthy of training under my goddess.”

He was strangely passionate about what he was talking about to the point where he had to explain it in a grandiose way to Senkyo. Although Yuu didn’t seem to catch on to what he was saying, Senkyo was kind enough to translate.

“So basically, your one-sided love with Yoshiko-sensei is still going unreceived. And now you’re jealous that she’s been talking about our training rather than noticing you. Got it.”

“H-Hey! Don’t—”

“Ah, I see now. I probably wouldn’t have understood if you didn’t explain it, Senpai. He was being a bit weird.”

“…!”

“Don’t worry, Hisho-chan. It’s hard to understand him in the first place which is probably why he’s still being ignored by Shizumu-sensei.”

“…!!”

“Oh, no wonder. The poor thing.”

“…!!!”

While Senkyo and Yuu were talking amongst themselves, Haruto was being shot down mercilessly by their conversation. Before they even noticed what was happening, he was already reduced to a lifeless corpse.

“Hm… Looks like he knew the truth deep down. He has it rough. Maybe we should leave him alone, Hisho-chan.”

“Y-Yeah, I agree.”

“L-Look, we won’t tell anyone about what happened here, so cheer up, kay?”

Senkyo delivered his last words of pity before closing the door to the rooftop. The two walk down the stairs with a bit of lingering regret in their hearts. They needed to question Haruto as much as possible to determine he was safe, but in turn, they completely demolished his mental state. Looking to change the air around them, Senkyo spoke.

“Hey, thanks for saving me back there.”

“No, that was nothing really.”

Earlier, before Haruto used flash strike, and as Senkyo was enhancing his lunch box, Yuu’s voice echoed in his head, telling him to step back the moment the enemy moves up towards him. Senkyo did exactly that and Yuu was able to cast binding magic from over the wall to cage Haruto. But now that he thought about it carefully…

“Hmm… You were able to determine our locations with your enhanced senses, right?”

“Yes, why?”

“Well, since your classroom is on the bottom floor. I was wondering if you heard our conversation all the way on the rooftop, and over all the other conversations going on throughout the school no less.”

“U-Uhm…”

Yuu seemed to be troubled when Senkyo pointed that out. She gave him a reply in a nervous tone.

“A-Are you doubting the power of a vampire, Senpai?”

“I mean, I would imagine having hearing like that would jumble every conversation in the background, so I just thought that maybe…”

He gazed into her eyes, pressuring her to tell the truth. Her face only became even more uneasy until she finally broke into a sigh.

“Nothing gets past you huh… I just wanted to show you the lunch I prepared from the ingredients we bought together. So I thought maybe you were at the rooftop again and went there. But then I heard you talking to that guy earlier and understood what was happening.”

“O-Oh, I see… then what happened to Ichika-chan?”

“I separated from her today. If you weren’t there, then I guess I would be eating by myself.”

Senkyo reflexively looked away with a bit of a red tinge on his face.

“Then… I guess it would be really bad if we don’t eat together now, huh?”

“Y-Yeah, it would… B-But after what happened I guess—”

“Alright then! Wanna go to the cafeteria then?”

“Y-Yes, that’d be great!”

The two headed to the cafeteria and used the time they had left to eat their lunch and enjoy their time with each other. However, their little excursion would not go unnoticed.

After school, in the middle of a break from their study session, Yuu had to go to the washroom so Kinro kindly directed her to its location verbally. In her absence was the perfect opportunity for Kinro to make his move. He peered at Senkyo inquisitively and slid to the middle of the table directly in front of him.

“So?”

Senkyo cocked his head to the side while he was taking a swig of his juice, indicating he needed him to be clearer about his purpose.

“Don’t play dumb. You know what I’m talking about. You and Hisho-chan ate together at lunch, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Oh, come on! Can’t you tell me more?”

“Never mind that. I have no idea what you’re on about.”

Kinro heaved a sigh and decided to stop beating around the bush.

“You and Hisho-chan are going out, aren’t you?”

“Oh, it was just another one of your ridiculous jokes.”

Senkyo left it like that and turned his attention to his textbook while taking another swig of juice.

“Don’t brush me off here! I’m serious!”

“Even if you are, you’re wrong. I just happened to come across her and ate together. There’s nothing wrong with eating with a female friend is there? Unless… wait! You swing that way!?”

“Shut it! You’re the one trying to throw terrible jokes here not me!”

“That so? Then are we done with this? I’m trying to pull your grades up over here.”

“I truly appreciate that which is why I’m going this. I’m not poking my nose out of curiosity. This is your first partner, right? I can give you some good advice. Although I never had a girlfriend myself, I heard a lot of stories from the ones around me. I’m popular after all.”

“Wow, this guy really just said that.”

Although Senkyo winced at Kinro, he could tell he was being earnest. He wasn’t some kind of love guru but he could definitely pitch in some advice when it came to the opposite sex. He appreciated his offer, but he didn’t need it.

“Thanks, but no thanks. We aren’t an item. What even gave you the idea in the first place? If it’s because we leave school together, I already told you yesterday that she’s just another student from the same dojo, the same as Watanabe-san.”

Yesterday, Senkyo told him that he was learning kendo. After seeing the opportunity, he used that as another cover-up for why he often left together with Yuu and Itsuki. He asked about it before but all Senkyo did was dodge the topic. Senkyo pointed that out again, but from the look on Kinro’s face, that didn’t seem to be the case.

“I saw you earlier this morning when you were on your way to school. And you had the same, depressed face you had yesterday. You tried to cover it up when you were in the classroom, but it was still there. All the way up until lunch break, that is. When lunch break came, you bolted out of the classroom with a huge grin on your face. Completely different from your attitude all morning. And later I spot you eating together with Hisho-chan like the happiest couple in the world. Does that ring any bells?”

Senkyo looked far off to the side, reminding himself of the events earlier that day. Kinro wasn’t wrong. He was being plagued by his dream that morning and he was undeniably happier when he was talking with Yuu.

*\*Happiest couple in the world huh… if only.\**

Senkyo turned towards Kinro with a troubled look on his face.

“I-I mean, that did happen. But there’s no way I looked THAT different.”

“Hahh… If only you had a mirror.”

The door behind Kinro opened and entered Yuu, cutting their conversation there.

“Sorry for taking so long. I got a bit confused.”

“No problem. Do you want to continue or rest a bit more?”

“I’d like to study now if you don’t mind.”

“Well then, let’s get back on track.”

The three continued their study session together and finished it without any further trouble. Dusk had arrived once more which marked the end of the study session for the three. Kinro gave his thanks and farewells as the two walked away towards the distance.

“Nnn~ It’s finally over with!”

Yuu stretched her arms to release her strain from studying. Senkyo gave her a sidelong glance, watching her as she spread her arms to the sky.

*\*I wonder what she would look like without her jacket…\**

Her blue jacket was obstructing Senkyo’s vision from seeing her body’s curves as she extended her arms upward. It took only a few seconds after the thought crossed his mind until he realized what he was doing. He shook his head furiously in hopes that those impure thoughts get blown away.

*\*D-Damn that Kinro… If only he hadn’t said that.\**

“Hm? Is there something wrong, Senpai?”

“A-Ah, no, nothing at all!”

Senkyo was a bit flustered, indicated clearly by his actions and flushed cheeks. Yuu had no idea why so she decided to ignore it.

“If you say so… Oh yeah, Senpai, do you want to come with me to town? There’s a café I’ve been looking at for a while, but, well… I don’t want to go alone.”

“Sure. I don’t have any other plans.”

“Great! Let’s get going!”

The two made their way to town and arrive in front of the café. The signboard in front of the building had “Savor Soul” written in fancy letters.

*\*So this is that café that Ryosei saw… Well, I’m not here to cause any trouble. I better not try to snoop around. I’d hate to ruin Hisho-chan’s first time here.\**

They entered a café and got themselves a table. A waitress approached them and took their orders. Senkyo looked around in search of Yukai, but he didn’t see her anywhere. Then, he remembered that she was also taking a break to prepare for the exams. Yukai didn’t tell him anything about it. It was just a memory from Ryosei’s side.

*\*That reminds me, Ryosei is also tutoring her. He’s been coming home later because of it. If that guy was alive, I swear they’d be a couple… Tsk, dammit Kinro. Now I can’t think of anything else but couples. I’ll get you back for this!\**

While Senkyo was lost in his mind, Yuu had been staring at him for a while now. Seeing the rapid changes in his expression she decided to call out to him.

“Senpai? Is there something wrong?”

“A-Ah, no, nothing at all!”

“You said the exact same thing earlier! Even your stuttering was the same!”

“Wh—That’s…”

“Senpai.”

She directed Senkyo a fierce glare, driving off any more untruths from his mouth. He let out a sigh, resigning himself to his fate.

“Maybe I’m a bit out of it. Kinro said something weird earlier and it’s been on my mind ever since.”

“I don’t know if it’ll do much, but I can hear you out.”

“I’m fine, really.”

Senkyo insisted he was okay, but she didn’t appreciate that and began to pout.

“Hmph, what a joke. That’s what you said before when I first proposed to guard you. And look what happened earlier this morning. If it weren’t for me, you’d be in a lot of trouble, Senpai.”

“Kgh…”

Senkyo couldn’t talk back. If it weren’t for her, he would’ve been forced to fight Haruto on the rooftop with only a lunch box in hand. It wasn’t a situation he would want to experience again.

*\*To think her Yukou-senpai Guard Duty would actually work… The naming was so lame that took it lightly. Ugh, I feel like I’ve been defeated in more ways than one.\**

“So, Senpai?”

Yuu kept pursuing the subject. If this kept up, she wouldn’t let go of him until she was satisfied. With that in mind, Senkyo responded in a roundabout way.

“Do you have someone you care about?”

Yuu was a bit taken aback, but after the initial surprise subsided, she spoke.

“I… I care about my family back at home.”

“Oh yeah, since they’re in another world, they’re probably on your mind all the time. My situation is something similar. You care about them so much that you’d always want to… want to be with them.”

“…Yeah. I’d like to see them again.”

Both Senkyo and Yuu turned silent. Their minds froze, inadvertently forgetting about the conversation they were having, and being sucked by their own thoughts.

*\*Someone I care about so much that I always want to be with them… I tried to avoid mentioning anything Kinro said, but that sure backfired… When I said that, the only person that came to mind…\**

Senkyo raised his head and saw Yuu, thinking to herself, lost in her thoughts. He couldn’t help but admire her. She had her head down so he couldn’t see her expression clearly. He unconsciously put his arms on the table to take a closer look at her. They were each in their own world, completely unaware of what was happening around them. Which was probably how they managed to ignore the waitress beside them for so long.

“U-Umm… Sir, your order is here…”

“O-Oh, sorry about that!”

Senkyo took his arms off the table which allowed the waitress to lay down their orders. His panicked voice alerted Yuu to raise her head and see her order getting placed in front of her. For Senkyo was a cup of black tea, while Yuu’s order was a strawberry parfait.

“Woaah! This looks delicious! This is going to be my first time eating something like this.”

“Haha, glad to see you enjoying yourself. You can call me anytime you want company. I’m sure I’ll be available.”

“Thank you, Senpai. By the way, are you okay with black tea? Didn’t you have some back in your home?”

“Hmm, I guess you make a fair point. Then how about next time? We’ll come back again and order something new.”

“…Next time, huh.”

Yuu’s face dropped for a second. To Senkyo’s surprise, she directed him with a strained smile, but the tone of her voice sounded like she was saying it from her heart. If he had to relate her current expression to a word, it would be… bittersweet.

“Yeah, let’s come back sometime!”

He didn’t know how to respond to her. It was the first time he saw anyone make that kind of expression. Luckily for him, his worries disappear when Yuu started to act normally. They continued to chat and enjoyed their night together. Senkyo undoubtedly had a great time that night. However…

*\*You are not human.\**

“GAHH!! HAA…! HAA…! HAA…!”

Just like the past two nights, the same nightmare assaulted him in his sleep. However, unlike the other nights, it never hit him this hard before. He was gasping for air, blood pumping through his veins at an increased rate, and anxiety filling up his paled face. But not only that, it was almost like he had a black hole in his heart, compressing it tightly and sucking it in, leaving only negative emotions, the true nature of that black hole. And of course, extreme emotions like that were poured over to his bodymate, Ryosei.

*“\*H-Hey! Senkyo, keep it together!\*”*

Hearing Ryosei’s voice caused him to get a grasp of the situation and immediately tried to level his breathing and calm himself down. A few minutes passed before he was back to normal, sitting on the bed he could feel his clothes sticking to his body because of all the sweat. It was an uncomfortable feeling that he wanted gone. But before that, he had to discuss something with Ryosei.

“You saw that, right?”

*“\*Yeah, I did.\*”*

What Senkyo asked him about was his nightmare. When it first happened two days ago, Ryosei’s consciousness was also asleep since he had nothing better to do. The night after that, he decided to help Senkyo with his nightmare and tried to erase it from the dream world while he was experiencing it. Unfortunately, his worries were too great to the point where not even he could do anything about it. And this night, he didn’t even get the chance to do anything. It was only uttered a single time, but even that was enough to send Senkyo to this state.

It wasn’t the way the sentence was said that was different, but the person who said it. Instead of Fulgur or Freda, the person he dreamt of that uttered that sentence, was Yuu. It brought him great distress, but at the same time, exposed the cause of these incessant nightmares.

“There’s… no other way to explain this huh?”

*“\*I think you should get this over with today, or else it’ll trouble you even more. I’m tired of compensating for your energy you know?\*”*

“Haha… Yeah, thanks for that.”

He let out a dry laugh as he was reminded how much Ryosei helped with his nightmares. He had to face his troubles now and get some closure before they got any worse. And the time to end his nightmares was after school at Yuu’s apartment.

**…………**

*“\*Okay…\*”*

Senkyo took a deep breath to release the tension in his lungs, but nothing he did worked in his favor. In the end, he wasn’t able to calm down his nerves before reaching this place. He couldn’t focus in class the whole day. The only thoughts in his mind were how he was going to bring up the subject to Yuu, and the infinite possibilities the situation could go wrong.

Yesterday night when Senkyo and Yuu were about to part ways, she confessed to him about something.

*“\*Actually, I’m still kind of falling behind on English. If you don’t mind, could you help me study tomorrow?\*”*

Of course, Senkyo accepted without a second thought. At first, it was only to help out Yuu with her studies. But after realizing what was truly plaguing him, the opportunity presented itself.

“Come in, Senpai.”

Yuu welcomed Senkyo into her apartment. She closed the door behind him as he entered, and it didn’t take him long to notice the luxury she was living in. He turned to the long hallway and spotted the smooth flooring designed in a wood strip parquet stretching to other areas of the apartment room. Solid wooden doors and pure white walls covered the place. And at the end of the hall, he could see the sunlight illuminating the apartment room through a glass door leading to the balcony outside.

“Th-This is…”

Senkyo was stunned in awe. He lived alone in a single house but nothing inside it produced the same vibe as the entrance to Yuu’s apartment room. His mouth was agape with his eyes wandering throughout the whole place.

“It’s nothing to boast about. I didn’t find this place, after all. The person who took care of me set me up with this place. Honestly, they had to pay the rent until I was finally able to financially support myself. It’s kind of embarrassing to say, hahaha…”

*\*We talked about it before coming here, but Hisho-chan’s apartment room is a 1LDK. I don’t know much about apartments since I didn’t need to. But man, this is a 1LDK?! I’ve never seen such luxury in my life! I think there’s a lot to boast about here!\**

After properly taking off their shoes, Yuu moved forward and Senkyo followed behind. He could already see a small part of the living room through the hallway which made him able to prepare himself for the rest of the room.

He already saw the flat-screen TV stationed by the wall on top of a low storage cabinet. Seeing as she has a flat-screen, it was safe to say there was more imposing furniture present like a couch or a huge bookshelf. It only took him a few steps not only to confirm his suspicion but break his expectations.

There was a large couch placed in front of the TV with a coffee table in between. Both of these were placed above a stylish carpet that served as a comfy seat for those who wanted to sit on the floor. The room served both as a living room and a dining room, indicated by the dining table and sets of chairs placed in front of the glass door that allowed a view of the outside. It was just as he expected the rest of the room to be after seeing the TV.

What caught him off guard was the display of wooden sculptures at the back of the room. They were by no means ordinary works. All of the artworks varied from animals, human figures, buildings, flowers, and more. They all had a similar carving style which hinted they were all made by the same artist. The sculptures were given an intricate design by carving the figures to the very last detail, including the strands of feathers, bricks of buildings, and other meticulous subtleties. Having these many high-quality artworks must’ve cost a fortune, probably much more than this whole apartment room. While Senkyo was racking his brain trying to process the information, Yuu dropped another bombshell revelation.

“Ah, those are the sculptures that I made. Do they look good?”

Something incredible just left Yuu’s mouth and entered Senkyo’s ears. He immediately turned around to face her, awestruck from her last remark.

“You’re asking me if they look GOOD!? These are breathtaking! I never knew you had a talent like this!”

“Hehehe, it’s a bit embarrassing to hear you say that… thank you.”

He turned back around and marveled at the wood sculptures again. They were truly a work of a professional.

“Whoa… So you support yourself by making wood sculptures huh… No wonder your apartment room looks so fancy. Selling these would fetch a high price in the market.”

“W-Well, I did get compensated generously for my work. But don’t misunderstand, I wasn’t the one who furnished the place. It was the one who helped me before. Even with all that money, I don’t think I would choose something this grand.”

“The person who helped you before… well, whoever they are they have quite the large wad of cash in their pocket to give you an apartment like this. Did you do anything to make them in debt to you?”

“No, not that I know of. Although this might be rude to them since they helped me a lot and all, I think it’s more appropriate to say that they forced this on me…”

“Huh, is that so…”

*\*I know there are generous people out there. But is someone really going to help a stranger this much just because they’re in need? Or maybe…\**

Senkyo was trying to piece together a theory for gaining this mystery man’s assistance, but his train of thought was interrupted when he heard Yuu call out to him.

“Senpai, come here. I want you to look at this.”

She presented him with another wood sculpture, but this one was different from all the others. The artwork was a figure of a man with long hair and with bat wings sprouting behind his back. His left hand had some sort of ball floating above it while his right arm was wrapped around a long spear.

What set apart this artwork from the others was everything about it. From afar, someone would assume that the sculpture was masterfully colored. But upon closer inspection, instead of being carved, it was more like the artwork was naturally created by nature.

His hair was composed of ice wool, a type of ice that looks like lustrous white hair that forms on dead wood. Similar to the wings, its clothes were black charcoal with outlines of the fine wood it once was. In contrast to this, his skin was made of white wood paler than birch. Anyone would assume a different kind of wood was added, but seeing as it was connected to the whole figure, Senkyo had his doubts. The ball on his left hand wasn’t an illusion. It was floating in the air with nothing connected to it. And lastly, the spear the man was holding was made out of black wood, twisting into a direction and holding a red stone on its tip.

This artwork was simply impossible for humans to create. There was no set of tools out there to be able to create it. But Senkyo faced Yuu and realized, it wasn’t something a measly human could create, it was something Yuu, a being from another world created.

“I-Is there even a word out there to describe this…?”

“Hey, Senpai, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Yuu gave him a fierce glare after misunderstanding his message.

“N-No, it’s not like that. What I meant was it's so incredible that I literally have no words for it.”

“Well, if you say so. This is something I made from Zerid. I used various magic to make it just like those ones over there. I carved them with wind magic since that’s what I’m used to doing.”

“You wood carved when you were in Zerid? I guess art exists even in other worlds.”

“Yeah. I started doing it when I was a kid. Before, I could only use wind magic to make similar sculptures to those. When I worked hard to improve, I could do ones like these.”

Senkyo scrutinized the sculpture again. It was amazing, but it definitely wasn’t something she could sell. People would question how she was able to make something like this if they saw. None of us would want that trouble. Magic isn’t public knowledge, after all.

Whatever magic she used, it was able to even preserve the ice beard for its hair. It may be some kind of magic related to time, but then again, he wasn’t sure. He could ask her, but that wasn’t what he was there for. Just as Senkyo was about to bring up the study session, he swallowed his words after hearing something interesting.

“You know, this is the only piece I made with all my heart.”

“Hm?”

“I made it after arriving on Earth. It’s the symbolic statue of my homeland. We call it ‘Mssioadr Bkkrn’ in your language, it means Vampire King. It’s made after, Hczarel Mszekrnlr, one of the past vampire kings. He took the throne by force and overthrew the corrupt king. The orb on his left hand is a pure ball of blood, representing the honor and pride of vampires. And on his right arm is the ‘Ycziiagdr,’ the spear he used to kill the king. The spear is a weapon that represents fear and death since it was a weapon widely used against vampires. But what Hczarel was trying to convey is to embrace your fear. He was the person that started the revolution since everyone else was too afraid to go against the corrupt king’s hand. He took up the spear that represents the people’s fears and slew the corrupt king with it. ‘Turn your fears into weapons and stand up,’ he said. He was a symbol of righteousness and heroicness… someone I won’t be able to imitate…”

The room grew quiet. Senkyo was listening attentively to her every word. A few seconds passed before Yuu realized the mood around her.

“Ah, I-I’m sorry, Senpai! I was prattling a lot there, wasn’t I? A-Anyway, I’m going to get my notes. Take a seat wherever you like!”

“Ah, wait—and she left…”

Yuu hurried into her room before Senkyo could even stop her. He turned to the side where she placed the sculpture she was holding.

“Turn your fears into weapons and stand up, huh? That’s easier said than done. But honestly, I would’ve loved to hear more.”

Yuu returned with her materials and sat next to Senkyo who was waiting for her on the coffee table. The clock ticked as the two immersed themselves in their study. A few hours passed and the time was around 6pm. Yuu offered Senkyo to eat dinner with her, he accepted which allowed them to continue their study. And now, after hours of processing the lessons, they finally reached a good place to take a rest.

“U-Uuuugh… English is so complicated…!”

Yuu whined as she limply rested her body on the table.

“You’ll learn eventually if you study hard enough… probably.”

“Hey! What’s with the insecurity!?”

“W-Well, I just thought I wasn’t one to talk since I don’t really experience the same troubles you have.”

“Nnnn~~! What’s wrong with this world!? Why is it so unfair!?”

“That’s just life, I guess.”

“You’re not helpiiing!!”

She sprang upwards in anger to face Senkyo and used the remaining force to fall back to the couch behind her.

“It’s break time, right? I’ll take a quick nap, just wake me up later.”

“Quit being lazy! I know you’re tired but once you finish the test I’m going to make for you, everything will be over with.”

She stared at Senkyo with a dissatisfied face, but soon it turned into a huge grin.

“‘Quit being lazy,’ he said. Who was it that spent all their free time lazing around in their room again?”

“K-Kgh…”

Feeling the guilt in his heart, Senkyo looked away and grimaced, leaving Yuu to be the victor of their mental warfare.

“Ha-ha thought so! I’ll be on the couch so just wake me up once you’re done!”

She crawled her way onto the couch behind her and placed her head on the pillow resting on the couch.

“Wow, you’re seriously doing this, huh? You know I’m still a guy, right? I might do something weird if you leave yourself defenseless like that.”

“Pfft…!”

“Hey! What’s with the snicker!?”

“N-No, it’s nothing, Senpai. I just thought it was funny that you resorted to empty threats like that.”

“H-Huh!? What makes you say that?”

“You aren’t the type of person to do that. That’s how much trust I have in you. Do you really plan on breaking that now?”

“W-Well… Gah, fine. Do whatever you want.”

“Hehe, thanks!”

In the end, Senkyo was mentally overpowered and was forced to let Yuu do as she pleased. Having the sour taste of defeat inside his mouth, he distracted himself by working on the test for Yuu to answer.

The room turned quiet with only the sound of Senkyo’s pen scratching on paper. A few minutes passed and he was about to finish the test… until.

“Wha!?”

Senkyo’s body jolted up after feeling a light breeze blow against the back of his neck. He turned around to see Yuu’s face. Unlike her state a few minutes ago, she was sleeping peacefully without a single strain on her expression. She was angelic, but after scanning the rest of her body, Senkyo found another way to describe her. Erotic.

He furiously shook his head the moment he realized what was going on in his mind. He thought it would take a while to rid himself of those ideas, but they came right off after coming to a realization.

“T-This is a bit cowardly… This can’t really give me any closure. No, practice! That’s it, this is practice! I’ll think of what to say now so I can say it later after studying, yeah!”

Senkyo turned back to his paper and resumed writing while he arranged his thoughts.

“Let’s see… H-Hey, Hisho-chan…”

He kept his head down, looking at the paper he was writing as he absentmindedly voiced his thoughts out.

“This is going to be a weird question, but how do you feel about me lying to you? You see, a few weeks ago, I found out something strange about myself. Apparently, I’m not human. It bothered me ever since for some reason. I kept getting nightmares about it, even… I didn’t think I’d have so much trouble with this. Before, I probably presented myself as some kind of amazing genius. Saying stuff like taking to account all of the possibilities and choosing the best path… or something like that. Haha… I can’t help but cringe now that I’m thinking about it. Honestly, those were just some things I said out of the heat of the moment. I’m nothing like that. And… I’d be lying if I didn’t say I wasn’t trying to act cool. I lied. I’m not cool or anything like that. I’m just human, no, something like a human. So, what do you think about me now…?”

The room returned to silence. Even Senkyo’s hand stopped from writing. After a few seconds passed, his question remained unanswered.

“Hmm… No, I think I can do without too many details. I need to think of something else—Ow!!”

Or so he thought. A sharp pain assaulted the back of his head, his senses signaling to shout in pain, but that pain suddenly turned into anxiety the moment he heard a voice behind him. The black hole that assailed him last night returned with a vengeance.

“What a stupid thing to say.”

He turned around to see Yuu’s annoyed expression, her eyebrows furrowed and her face pouting. After seeing that, the black hole in his heart slowly began to be replaced by hope, the hope of acceptance. He focused on her voice, and the message she was conveying.

“I wouldn’t think any less of you just because of that. I’ve seen who you really are, Senpai. I don’t need you to tell me that you were trying to act cool. I could tell from the start anyway.”

“Wh-What!?”

“Yep. Really though, who wouldn’t notice that you were spouting something you saw on anime? It was pretty lame at first. The heat of the moment really helped you out there.”

“H-Hey!”

He shouted in embarrassment, trying to hide it from her with anger, but the rosy cheeks on his face didn’t help his case.

“Hmph, that’s what you get for trying to ask me that question. Senpai, I think you’re a great person, human or not. You’ve been a huge help ever since I met you. I saw what you can do and the extent you’d go to achieve your goal. I wouldn’t look at you differently just because you’re not human. I’m a vampire, remember? Not human. If that’s the case then we’re more alike than we initially thought! Hmm… now that I think about it, I accused you of not being human when we first met remember?”

Senkyo stopped to think and searched his memories. What she was saying was true. She told him she wasn’t human. At the time, he didn’t think anything of it, not just because he thought it was nonsense, but also because he didn’t care if he wasn’t.

“…T-That’s… That’s right. Hahahahaha, I’ve really changed, haven’t I?”

Senkyo let out a hearty laugh. Meanwhile, Yuu just stared at him, clueless about what was going on in his mind.

“Hm? You have? I didn’t really notice anything.”

“Maybe I changed the moment I met you? It sounds very possible to me.”

Yuu averted her eyes in embarrassment but brought it back to him before responding.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Haha, no, in fact, it’s the exact opposite. Thank you for meeting me.”

“I-I don’t think you need to thank me for that! …Really. Maybe you’ll even regret saying that down the line.”

Yuu’s mood made an abrupt change. It was Senkyo’s last line that triggered it, but he had no clue why it did.

“What do you mean?”

“You were worried about lying to me, right? Well, actually … Even I… Even I’m keeping something from you. Something that you definitely wouldn’t forgive me for.”

“Huh? There’s no way I’d bare a grudge on you—”

Yuu placed her finger on Senkyo’s mouth, preventing it from opening any further. She stared at him with glossy eyes, trying to hold back the tears inside them.

“Then, I’ll believe you when we get there. It’s not a secret I can keep for long anyway. So, I’m going to say this to you in advance. I’m sorry.”

She tried to say it in a cheerful tone, but her voice turned shaky at the end of her sentence. Whatever was troubling her, it wasn’t any normal problem.

“Well then, I rested long enough. Are you done with your test, Senpai?”

Yuu tried to change the subject and end the conversation, but Senkyo didn’t feel like doing so. At the very least, not if he hadn’t said his piece.

“May our relationship turn into a great one.”

He froze time around them. Neither he nor Yuu moved a muscle. The only sign around them that proved this wasn’t the cause of magic was the clock on the wall, ticking incessantly to fill the silence. Senkyo let go of a short phrase, but both of them knew what it signified. It was Senkyo’s ideology of relationships that he shared with Yuu when they were studying at Kinro’s place. He defined a great relationship as one that could be repaired no matter what hardship threatened to break it, even if it is subjected to trials of lies and deceit, he was hoping their relationship would be repaired and forged into something stronger.

“…!”

Senkyo jolted in surprise. He was suddenly being enveloped by warmth, the feeling of clothes brushing against his neck. A weight pressed down on his head, locks of light crimson hair entering his peripheral vision, causing the scent he’d been catching ever since the moment he arrived there to become stronger than ever. Yuu was hugging him gently. Realizing this, Senkyo’s brain malfunctioned, leaving him in a daze.

A minute of silence passed, enough for Senkyo to regain his senses. He noticed that Yuu’s embrace was getting tighter as time passed, but it didn’t bother him. Whatever troubles Yuu was going through, it was no trivial matter, so he placed his hand on her arm, hoping to comfort her even if just a little. He wanted that moment to last forever, being this close to her, becoming a pillar to support her, this was one of the things he’d never done in his life, and never thought of doing it until now. He wanted to be there for her.

Unfortunately, all good things had to come to an end. Yuu’s arms loosened, signaling the end of this beautiful moment, bringing a bittersweet cloud to loom over Senkyo’s face. But just before it all ended, Yuu slid down to his shoulder, her cheeks rubbing against Senkyo’s as she did so, and brought her mouth close to his ear. She whispered softly into it.

“…Seriously, Senpai… you always have the last word. Thank you…”

A wave of allure brushed Senkyo once again. It was the same charm he found when Yuu wholeheartedly expressed herself back in Kinro’s room. But this time, not with a smile, but with the sweet tone of her voice. He couldn’t see her face, but he could vividly imagine it as her voice gently funneled down his ear. Even without being seen, he could sense Yuu’s raw emotion with just her voice. It fascinated him. How can someone express themselves so clearly and honestly? It was a mystery to him.

As Yuu pulled herself away, Senkyo was assaulted with melancholy, leaving him with a sense of longing.

“I think I’m ready to take the test, Senpai.”

“O-Oh yeah, it’s over here…”

Senkyo turned to the notebook he wrote the test in and saw the last question was very peculiar. He didn’t even have any memory that he wrote it. In English, it asked, “Do you love me?”

“W-W-W-WHOAWAWAWAWAITWAITWAITWAIT!!”

He grabbed his pen in a panic and mercilessly scratched over the last question, leaving only a large unsightly mass of lead. There was so possible way for anyone to recover the message that was written behind it now.

“A-Are you okay, Senpai?”

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine. Yep, totally fine. Here’s your test. Oh, the last question is a bonus point. I’ll give it to you for hearing me out.”

“O-Okay.”

Senkyo placed his back against the edge of the couch and released the tension inside his body with a long sigh.

“Are you sure you’re fine, Senpai?”

Yuu asked while looking at him worriedly.

“I am. I’m just a bit tired.”

“Then how about you sleep and I’ll wake you up after I finish?”

“Heh, no way. I have to watch my student to the very end, you know? There’s a chance they might cheat too.”

“You know I wouldn’t do that, right? Hahaha…”

“I’ll believe it when I see it. Come on now, get to writing.”

“Nnn~! Aren’t you being unreasonably spiteful!?”

“I can say the same thing to you earlier.”

“Fine, fine, I’m doing it.”

Yuu returned her attention to her paper and began answering. Later, she finished and got a passing score from Senkyo. Having completed tonight’s goal, Yuu made dinner with the help of Senkyo and the two ate together while chatting the whole while. After cleaning up, it was time for Senkyo to take his leave.

“Thank you again, Senpai. For coming all the way here just to help me out.”

“No problem…”

Senkyo hushed, seemingly being taken away by his thoughts.

“I guess this is—”

Just before Yuu could say goodbye, he interrupted her.

“Hisho-chan, do you mind coming with me for a bit?”

Senkyo dragged Yuu off somewhere. They took a taxi somewhere to the edge of town and dropped off a seemingly empty street. They then entered the woods and navigated through the darkness. Yuu was holding up her phone’s flashlight as she traveled, but it seems like Senkyo, who was in front of her, didn’t need it. It wasn’t long until they finally reached an open area where Senkyo welcomed Yuu with a bright smile on his face.

“This is it!”

Yuu walked up to where Senkyo stood and widened her eyes as she saw the scenery before her.

“It’s… the town!”

Numerous lights shined from inside the huddle of buildings that spread throughout the area. There were various types of buildings down there, stores, restaurants, houses, and more, but from where they were currently looking at, they were all the same. Small blocks of varying shapes embellished the night with their colorful, illuminating lights. They were like the stars that decorated the night sky, but instead of the open plane above, it was on the ground and spaced closer to each other and more patterned than those on the opposite side of the horizon, but even then, it had its own kind of beauty.

Yuu’s eyes seemed to be glued to the man-made attraction before her. Seeing how fixated she was along with the huge smile on her face brought a similar one to Senkyo.

“This is the place my dad always brought me when I was down. It was to cheer me up, saying stuff like, ‘Hah, look at you now! You’re the king of this place and the ones below you are your peasants to control!’”

“U-Umm, is this the part where I’m supposed to laugh?”

“Haha, don’t worry, I had the same reaction. But then, he said this, ‘Since you’re the king now, it’s your responsibility to maintain this beauty. Life has its ups and downs, but somehow, we humans still managed to make things like these even when we don’t mean to. Don’t lose sight of what’s important. Keep your mind calm and collected. If you do that, I’m sure you’ll make the right decisions.’”

“…”

She was out of words and simply stared at Senkyo in bewilderment. Noticing, her gaze on him, Senkyo began to stutter.

“Y-Yeah, those were some pretty embarrassing lines huh. Hahaha…”

“Hmm, that may be so. But to me, I think they’re lines to live by.”

“O-Oh come on, those weren’t that great.”

“Then if they weren’t, why did you bring me here with those exact lines in mind?”

“H-Hmm…? I wonder why…”

Senkyo averted his eyes from Yuu’s probing gaze and directed them to the sky above. He knew his face was reddening from the heat, so he had to in order to cover it up without looking suspicious. All he could really do was look up and hope the darkness would swallow up the tinge of red on his face. It was then that he was reminded of another word from father.

*“\*Do you see that moon up there? I always thought of that as something marvelous. Anyone can make their own interpretations about it and they can never be wrong. It’s their personal opinion of it, after all. When I was a kid, I would always shout out my frustrations at that thing. It would always put me right back on my groove. How about you? What do you think the moon is there for?\*”*

Coincidentally, it was a full moon tonight. It shined down upon the earth with all of its beauty.

“The moon, huh…”

Senkyo muttered under his breath. Even though it was in a low voice, Yuu still picked it up and shifted her gaze towards it. From beside her, she hears him say…

“I think a full moon shows how often you’re likely to get an opportunity. It happens once a month, so a one in thirty chance a day. If you take away the lunar calendar, you’ll never know when it’ll happen, but you just need to look out for it and keep looking at the sky. If you stop looking for a day, you might miss it, if you look too much, you’ll just tire yourself before you find it, but what you need to know is that it’s there. It’s somewhere out there, an opportunity to get something you want, one you need to work hard for to get, but also something you need to balance to keep looking for it. That’s what the moon is for me.”

“Hm?”

But even so, she didn’t understand a single word he mentioned. She directed him a look of confusion. Taking notice of this, he simply smiled. He met her gaze with his own and said…

“Just like the full moon, another opportunity appeared. The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?”

It was something a being from another world wouldn’t pick up on, that’s what was on Senkyo’s mind. A poetic way of delivering someone their feelings. It was embarrassing to say, but it just seemed fitting. A roundabout way of telling someone you love them.

“Yeah, it really is.”

Seeing how she shifted her gaze to the moon right after, it was safe to say she didn’t pick up on his message.

“*\*I love Hisho-chan. Others might think it’s too fast to say after only spending over a month with her but, I’m sure. What plagued me this whole week wasn’t because I was afraid of dying or scared of not being human. The only thing I was afraid of was how she was going to treat me if she found out I was something different. What I felt wasn’t fear of dying, it was fear of losing Hisho-chan. By all means, I want to lay my feelings bare right here and now… but now’s not the time. Something is plaguing her mind. A subject similar to brought me to the state I was in this morning. I don’t want to burden her with unnecessary confessions. Once she finds closure to her worries, then I’ll tell her. I’ll confess how I feel and make her mine. Right now, that’s the goal I want to work towards. It may take weeks, maybe months, years even, but I’ll keep looking for the chance, the chance to tell her how I really feel.\*”*

*\*That’s what I said to myself that night. But who would’ve thought that my resolve would be crushed only after a day that thought crossed my mind?\**

“Senpai, I love you.”

**Chapter 6: Confession**

It’s a few minutes before five o’clock in the afternoon. The sun is beginning to set on the horizon. The sky was painted with a vivid orange, tinting the clouds with its color. Students were shouting at the distance, some were cheering, others were barking out orders, or involuntary grunts as they kick around the soccer ball on the field.

Senkyo could be seen sitting on a bench watching the school’s soccer club playing their final practice game of the day. The score was 3 to 10, nowhere near close to each other. One team was winning the game by a huge landslide. It was the last quarter of the game, but despite the inevitable defeat the other team was going to take, they were still giving it their all. They didn’t seem to have any plans of backing down.

“I guess this is that fighting spirit you get from facing a formidable foe. They do this every day, so if they’re this worked up then maybe this is the highest they’ve scored on him so far? Or maybe this is the lowest he’s scored. Either way, he really is something.”

He focuses his gaze on the monster that caused the scores to be how they are. It was his best friend Honjou Kinro, the ace of the soccer team. He is a striker that easily weaves through the enemy lines using his insane footwork like flowing water. Not only that, he can steal the ball from the enemy so quick that he was basically both the toughest offense and defense.

The opposing team needed to keep their distance from him or lure him away in order to break through him, but after that, they had the rest of his team to worry about. Those three points on the board showed how many times they were able to make a miracle happen.

“Well, it’s about time. I better get going.”

Senkyo stands up from the bench and heads back into the school building. Normally, he wouldn’t be here this late, but a conversation earlier that day bound him to the school’s premises.

*\*I wonder what Hisho-chan wants…\**

*“\*…Uhmm. Senpai… can I, ask you a favor?\*”*

*“\*Sure, what is it?\*”*

“\*Later in the afternoon, could you come to the rooftop at 5 o’clock? There’s… something I need to say.\*”

Earlier, the two spent their lunch break together at the cafeteria. However, unlike the previous times Senkyo spent lunch with Yuu, the reason wasn’t that he was awoken by nightmares anymore. He woke up early in the morning feeling better than ever and made haste to prepare a lunch to eat together with her. It was something they arranged before parting yesterday night. Since it was the last day of the week, Senkyo thought it would be nice to end it like this. Senkyo reached the stairs after recalling how he ended up in this situation, but then he remembered something.

“Wait, is the roof going to be unlocked? I haven’t gone there ever since that weird guy found us… Hashimoto-san, was it? Guess there’s only one way to find out.”

After reaching the top of the stairs, he stood in front of the door to the rooftop and turned the doorknob. Seeing as it was unlocked, he opened the door and saw Yuu leaning against the fence behind her. He stopped for a moment to take in the sight before him. The orange rays of the sunset colored the edge of her figure, almost as if he just opened the door to the world’s most valued treasure.

“Oh, Senpai… you came.”

She raised her head and curved the edge of her lips into a melancholic smile.

“Yeah, of course I did. More importantly, is something wrong?”

“…Wrong, huh? I’d say everything about me is wrong.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

She stared at the ground as she approached Senkyo. After reaching a reasonable distance, she took two deep breaths without showing her face and spoke.

“Um, Senpai… do you remember what happened when we first met?”

Senkyo’s expression brightened as he reminisced their fateful meeting, seeming to be entertained as he recalled the events.

“Yeah, it was kinda weird huh? You suddenly came out of the closet as a bat and few around the room. Later when we trapped you in a jar a werewolf suddenly busted in the door. It was definitely a surprise, but what was even more shocking was seeing you lying on the floor instead of the bat, hahaha…”

His face turned red as he summarized their first encounter. He omitted the small details like seeing her naked but it didn’t take out the fact that it crossed his mind. He did that to be considerate, but his efforts were for naught.

“Mhm. Looking back at it, you saw me naked, didn’t you? You even dressed me up with your clothes hahaha… Sorry about that.”

“Y-Yeah… that did happen, yes.”

Yuu’s remark made his face take a deeper tint of red. Luckily for him, she wasn’t looking at his face right now.

“Sorry for suddenly bringing this up on you. I just thought that it’s been a lot of fun ever since I met you. Thank you, for everything.”

His expression took a sudden change from embarrassment to worry. He didn’t know why, but the tone of her voice was a sad one.

“That’s good an all but, what happened?”

She didn’t respond. Instead, she took a step closer, followed by another, and another, all the way until her head was against his chest. Senkyo was a bit surprised but immediately composed himself. It wasn’t something he should keep interpreting as affection. That’s what he said to himself, but then…

“I don’t have any right to say this, but I’m just too selfish to hold myself back…”

“…Hisho-chan?”

“Senpai, I love you.”

In less than a second, after registering her words in his head, all his senses went haywire. His heartbeat was pounding on his chest at an immense rate. It felt like it would bust out and take his life. It wasn’t even a question that his face was beet red. His body temperature rose and his mind went blank, unable to register anything besides what his eyes were presenting him.

“…I love you. That is what I thought.”

As if his mind wasn’t already malfunctioning from her sudden confession, her words completely shut him down. His delight transformed to anxiety and caused his beating heart to ache.

“…W-What do you mean?”

Senkyo shot her a question. She didn’t answer. However, instead of repeating the question, after peeking around her head, he noticed the floor directly under her was dampening in small circles. She was crying.

After keeping her head facing down, she finally raises it and faces Senkyo, showing him her distraught figure. Her eyebrows furrowed, eyes were drenched and sullied with tears, lips twitching from the intensity she was grinding her teeth. Seeing her like that shocked him, but more importantly, it brought him back to his senses and told him what to do.

Silently, he pulled her closer and wrapped her around his arms. Instead of words, he used actions and coated her with his warmth, reassuring her that he was there for her. Just as she was about to accept his protection, she suddenly shoved him away.

“N-No! No more! Please! Don’t be kind to me! I’m begging you!”

He took a step forward, calling out for her as he did.

“Hisho-ch—”

“NO! Don’t come any closer! It’s for your own good! Just stay where you are!”

Despite Yuu’s warning, Senkyo placed another foot forward and kept doing so, warranting more warnings from Yuu. One after another he placed forward and continued to ignore her words until he was directly in front of her with almost no distance between them.

“It’s alright.”

He wrapped her again in a hug, and just like before, she tried to escape, but Senkyo wasn’t going to allow her that and ensared her with his arms. He hugged her tight.

“NO! No, no, no, no, no! Y-You don’t understand, Senpai! Please… don’t be…”

She continued to struggle, but Senkyo pinned her against the fence behind her to secure his bind on her. After realizing she wasn’t going to escape, she slowly calmed down and reluctantly accepted his kindness. In a trembling voice, she said…

“…Yukou-senpai… you’re too kind… so much that it’ll hurt me even more the moment you hate me… Please… let go…!”

“That’s impossible. Letting you go now, as well as hating you. It’s impossible. That’s why you should just give in and rely on me. Okay?”

Yuu stayed still and kept silent after hearing that. It was only after a few moments later did she move. She raised her hand, crawling on the surface of his chest to do so, and placed it on his cheek.

Looking downwards, he saw her face covered in tears, but instead of distress, she showed him a strained, bittersweet smile.

“I can’t.”

She clasped his cheek and pulled down his head and placed her mouth directly in front of his ear and whispered to him.

“I can’t keep relying on you. I’ll handle this, I promise. Because maybe… just maybe, I really do love you after all.”

Her melancholic voice echoed in his ear and sent his heartrate went back up, but she then calmed it down after she sunk her fangs into his neck. Under the twilight sky, high up the school rooftop, Senkyo’s consciousness faded as Yuu’s fangs set him to sleep.

His body limped towards Yuu. Strangely enough, even when he was unconscious, he was still keeping the same power in his embrace. She quietly returned his hug and revered in it for a few seconds before gently sitting him against the fence. A ray of light sped out his body and zipped past Yuu. Behind her appeared a familiar face. The person who she became close with after training desperately for the battle royale. Shiro.

“Y-Yuu-chan… why did you…?”

Her eyes shifted in confusion from Yuu and her unconscious master, her eyes demanding an explanation for her actions. Yuu faced the ground before gathering the courage to look her in the eye.

“This is… as you can see.”

Shiro grit her teeth in frustration and entered a fighting position.

“Shiro doesn’t know why you’re doing this, but Shiro is not going to let you take her big brother away!”

“…”

Shiro summoned fireballs in the air and shot them towards Yuu. However, as if she expected that, summoned the same number of fireballs and intercepted all of them.

“What!?”

Yuu quickly closed in. Shiro panicked and threw her fist out to punch her, but was mercilessly thwarted by Yuu as she swept Shiro’s arm away with a flat hand and swiftly drove the edge of her hand into her neck, assaulting her carotid and knocking her out. Yuu caught her body before she fell to the ground and placed her beside the rooftop bulkhead.

“They taught me hand-to-hand combat just for me to use it against them… I’m despicable.”

She took a paper taped to a translucent gem from her pockets and placed it inside Senkyo’s bag. She then arranged his bookbag neatly along with his shinai bag in front of the entrance to the rooftop.

She returned to Senkyo and stared at him for a moment, taking in the actions she had done before shaking her head to return to reality. On her back appeared huge bat wings that ripped through her uniform and jacket as they sprouted. She spread them wide before picking up Senkyo and placing him behind her. Having fixed her position, she flapped her wings and entered the sky with Senkyo on her back, leaving the school behind them.

Dusk had passed and the sky was coated with a dark but starry mantle. The bright moon above gleamed its radiant light down on earth, but not enough to illuminate its surface. In a dark, quiet forest where the chirping of nocturnal insects delivered a relaxing ambiance that bettered that of the honking horns and roaring engines of the city, a lone light brightened the area, slowly moving through the woodland.

There traveled Yuu with Senkyo unconsciously laying against her back. An orb of light floated in front of them and lit up the path they trekked. At some point, she stopped to look around her surroundings. She took a deep breath before calling out into the darkness.

“I’m here!”

For a moment, there didn’t seem to be anyone present, but then, a voice came from the tree in front of her.

“Oh, good job.”

“W-What? Who are you!?”

An unfamiliar voice reached Yuu’s ears. She scrutinized the tree and spotted a dark figure come out. She commanded her orb to irradiate him and revealed the shadow’s true form. A figure pale from top to bottom, or rather, completely white. They possessed no skin, muscles, or any sort of trace that they should be alive, yet they were standing before Yuu moving around and conversating when the only thing their body comprised of was bare bones. A skeleton.

An empty husk that moved like it was alive. Its skull had multiple scars ingrained in it, and its skeletal body was covered in light armor and a tattered shawl. One of its hands was behind the tree, obstructing Yuu’s vision.

“Hm? I guess you didn’t get the message. In this situation, you can call me a courier. I’m here to pick up two packages. Namely, you and that boy.”

It raised its scraggy finger and pointed at both of them.

“I suggest you don’t make this harder than it has be and cooperate with us.”

Despite the skeleton’s warning, Yuu opened one of her hands and prepared herself for battle.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk, I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Suddenly, a bony spear impaled the ground in front of her and froze a small area of the ground. Her close proximity to the spear allowed her no time to react and got caught by the ice that swallowed her feet and rooted her to the ground.

She turned to the source of the spear and saw a blue flame floating in the air. With her enhanced eyesight, she discerned the flame was another skeleton. Its skull was submerged in the blue flame that exposed its position. From the looks of it, it was still able to wear a hood over its skull, and just like the other skeleton, it was wearing a light set of armor.

Then, from behind her, she heard the grass rustling along with heavy footsteps. It was a gigantic figure wearing a set of full-plated armor with the inside of its helmet glowing an ominous shade of red. She couldn’t see inside its helmet, but the red inside it was enough to tell her it was another skeleton. It stood there menacingly within the darkness, awaiting its time to strike.

Silence befell them. The tension in the air indicated there was no true option for peace. Then, Yuu clasped the ground and erected a barrier to protect them. She needed more time to assess the situation and cast her spells, unfortunately, she wasn’t granted that.

The huge armored skeleton behind her stepped up with speed faster than its body suggested. It held an enormous warhammer and slammed it on her barrier. The sound of glass shattering reached her ears, alerting her that her barrier had already been broken the moment it was erected.

Along with its devastating strike, she noticed a spear was hurling towards her. She tried to react but she was too slow. All she could do was shove Senkyo off her back before it penetrated her right shoulder. She felt her body weakening from the spear, not just because she was injured, but the spear was spiked with weakening l magic.

The armored skeleton behind her picked the two of them up with each hand and placed one finger on their mouths, restricting their movements and their ability to cast magic.

“See? What did I tell you? Wow, I thought we would have a bit of trouble but I thought wrong. I knew my Lord made the right choice.”

The skeleton spoke in a mocking tone. Convinced it was all over, it turned its back and began heading back into the darkness, but then, the armored hand that was restraining Yuu began to melt. Suddenly, she busted out of the enemy’s clutches, making two spirals of fire, one from her feet and one from her hands as she forced her way out. She then hovered in the sky by revealing her wings and sustaining her current altitude. She took out the spear that was stuck in her shoulder and cast magic to close up her wound. The skeleton was dumbfounded after seeing her performance.

“W-What was that!? A castless spell?! No, that can’t be… Impossible… an Angel!? These underhanded tricks can only be done by them! But why did my Lord not inform us about this!?”

The skeleton’s head suddenly burst and bathed in a black flame. It finally revealed his other hand holding a bone-like kusarigama. The blade of the kama was jagged and was connected to a skull as its iron weight with a spine chain. He turns to the other skeletons and addressed them in a strange language.

“Lrbk fia iiapq enlr en havvrel! Ja siuioakrn oa lr enoag fia xeoadr!”

(Take her down but be careful! Our mission is to bring her alive!)

The three skeletons made their move. The armored one placed its warhammer on the ground and launched into the sky with insane speed and began mumbling a spell. The skeleton perched on the trees barraged spears at her. Meanwhile, the skeleton who ordered the other two equipped its kama. The blade of the kama began to turn and straightened itself, turning from a sickle to a short harpoon and throwing it at Yuu.

She evaded the spears they threw at her with swift movements, but it was only when she heard the sound of rustling metal behind her did she realize she was being herded towards the armored skeleton. She immediately propelled herself upwards and turned to look downwards and bring her vision back on her enemies.

Just as she expected, the armored skeleton tried to catch her. Now that it reached the peak of its jump, it stopped in mid-air and fell back down, but not before completing the chant of its spell. By the time it reached its apex, it only needed to cast it.

“—Adruilraxe Uilra!”

Sparks of lightning coiled between its hands and shot out a streak of lightning that rendered her immobile. She couldn’t move her arms, legs, wings, or mouth which made her head straight for the ground. Luckily for her, she was still able to cast spells without the need for chanting.

*“\*O Graceful Healer, cleanse us of the ailments that curse our bodies. Gather your power for those that impede our path. Purify!\*”*

Her senses slowly came back to her. However, another spear impaled her from behind and her body began to weaken. She tried to take it out, but another blade impaled her leg. It was the short harpoon the skeleton threw at her, and along with it, was a paralyzing spell that ran through the bones and immobilized her again.

“I caught a big one!”

The skeleton pulled on the spine-rope and brought her down to the ground. She was about to cast a spell to break out of her binds and regain altitude, but she saw more spears coming for her despite already being caught. The enemy was cautious. Even if she broke out, she would only be bound again.

“I guess there’s no other way.”

After she analyzed her situation, she chanted.

*“\*O Graceful Healer, cleanse us of the ailments that curse our bodies. Gather your power for those that impede our path. Purify!\*”*

Regaining her ability to speak, she chanted again.

“O Nature, bless me with your power, empower your children—"

“It’s useless! We’ll just silence you—what!?”

Indeed, there was no time for her to finish her chant. She was only a few meters away and with weakening spears only inches away from her body. Yuu was chanting a nature spell. Everyone present knew she wasn’t going to make it. However, what followed after wasn’t the continuation of the chant for Overgrowth, but a cast for a completely different spell.

“Acid Blood!”

Three new spears pierced her skin, all of them releasing the blood inside them, but then, she took them by surprise as they saw the blood coming out of her wounds were spreading to the weapons around her and climbed down the spine-rope at an alarming rate. The skeleton quickly severed the connection by only wishing it and backed off. The spears and the harpoon that were skewered in her body were completely covered in her blood and began to disintegrate. With the weapons out of her body, she uttered another spell—the continuation to her last.

“Aid me in my plight and suppress my enemies. Overgrowth!”

The greenery around them began to grow vines and shackled her enemies. They tried their hardest to break free, but the vines around them only multiplied the longer they struggled. Knowing it was useless, they stopped and took a different approach. The three skeletons cast the same spell and a burst of fire burned the vines around them. She immediately went airborne and returned to the sky. This time, at a higher altitude where none of them can reach her easily. It was the perfect opportunity for her to finish them off from afar.

“O Fire, I bring rise to you as the master of flame—”

But then, her chant was interrupted when the armored skeleton raised Senkyo towards Yuu. Their leader skeleton shouted to her.

“If you don’t come down here now, we’ll just take this guy and leave! Our mission was to get the both of you but we won’t die for it! Come down here and save your friend before we get too impatient!”

The armored skeleton handed Senkyo to the black flamed one, tied him up to a tree, and activated a barrier around him.

“I’m warning you! If you break this barrier, we’ll just take him and leave! The same goes if you try those long-range attacks again! If you want to save him, you’ll have to face us on our terms!”

Having delivered its threat, it faced the armored skeleton.

“Gxeiia lroa ent xe xerel huiui. Osi goag lr glr lrdr aui j ja pqxejui.”

(Guard this boy at all costs. I’m going to get the rest of our weapons.)

The armored skeleton nodded its head in confirmation. Then, the black flamed skeleton took out a white gem from under its shawl and motioned it downwards in mid-air. In doing so, it ripped through the space before it to make a rift, almost as if it was ripping a box open with a box cutter. It entered through it and disappeared, and a few seconds later, so did the rift that swallowed it.

Meanwhile, in the air, Yuu was gritting her teeth after hearing the skeleton’s threat.

“Damn it!”

She then hurled downwards towards the enemy in an attempt to defeat the remaining two.

**…………**

Earlier that afternoon, around the time Yuu left with Senkyo, the door to the rooftop opened along with a voice of a man dissatisfied about the world. It was Haruto, the person that attacked Senkyo on that very rooftop. Right now, the subject he was complaining about was the reason Senkyo and Yuu were able to enter the rooftop on that every afternoon.

“Agh, I left it to unlock again. Seriously, it’s such a pain to remember somethin’ as little as turnin’ a lock after a hard, long session of cleanin’ a whole goddamn rooftop! Haahh… I wish they’d just put some kind of automatic lock system or somethin’. They have the money for it too! Hm? What’s this?”

Haruto spots two bags in front of the door, a bookbag and a shinai bag.

“Did someone leave it here? I better find out who this belongs to huh…”

He approaches it, seemingly with good intentions. Then, the moment he was in reach with the bag, his mouth twisted into a fiendish smile, and his eyes filled with malicious intent.

“Hahahaha! Yeah, right! Like I’ll waste my time tryin’ to find some nobody! This is your punishment for enterin’ the rooftop without permission dumbass! Hahahahaha!!”

He opened the bookbag and began rummaging its contents.

“Hmm… Let’s see, nothin’, nothin’, nothin’, nothin’… Jeez, what’s with this guy? It’s all books and study material in here. Where’s the treasure? Manga, porn mags, anything? Ugh, booooring!!”

Despite plundering the person’s bag, he still had the guts to insult the person’s belongings despite them being the norm. If someone were present, they would surely point out how the actual strange person was him.

“…Ah, wait. Oooooh, I might’ve found somethin’!”

Haruto takes out a translucent gem with a piece of paper taped onto it.

“What is this? Some kinda weird confession item? Man, times are changin’.”

Despite him identifying it as an important personal item, he still continued his prying and casually opened the piece of paper. Contradictory to his expectations, the piece of paper was actually a map of the town, and a particular spot had a red circle, bringing his attention to it. It was in the middle of the forest just outside of the town.

“Oh, it’s just some kinda treasure map. Seriously? Aren’t ya bit too old to be playin’ these games?”

He tossed them aside just like the rest of the bag’s contents. As the bag gets emptier, he noticed a familiar lunch box within the bag.

“Hmm… Isn’t this that Senkyo guy’s lunch box? Wait a second…”

After realizing who the owner was, Haruto’s eyes immediately shifted from the book bag to the shinai bag and opened it. And of course, there he saw the one and only, Kuro Yaiba.

“Holy shiiiit. What’s this thin’ doin’ layin’ around here? Did he come in here and forget about it or somethin’? …Damn, I better report this to the chief! Kukuku… this will be the perfect revenge! This is what he gets for killin’ my heart over and over again! …Huh?”

As he was laughing maniacally about cooking up his spiteful plan, he heard a low groan coming from behind the entrance bulkhead. Curious, he stood up, inspected the source of the voice, and saw Shiro sitting against the wall.

“What the hell!? Th-This is a catgirl, isn’t it!? Wh-Wh-What in… Oh! Are my fantasies finally coming true!? …Wait, no, I’m not into little girls. Then again furries…”

While Haruto was spouting nonsense to himself, Shiro’s eyes finally opened and the flood of memories hit her like a truck, and her brain was sent to panic mode.

“Wh-Where is she!? Wait, no, where’s Onii-chan!?”

Shiro searched around agitatedly, the dread apparent in her face. She saw Haruto and even made eye contact with him, but she paid him no mind until she cleared the whole rooftop and confirmed that Senkyo and Yuu were gone.

“Hey, you! Where are Onii-chan and Yuu-chan!?”

Haruto was taken aback at what was happening. He had no idea who this person was, and what she was doing here, but there was at least one thing he caught on to.

“What… Y-Yuu-chan? Are you talkin’ about that vampire that’s always around that Senkyo kid?”

“That’s right! Where are they!?”

“I-I have no idea. When I got here only his bag and sword were left.”

He points behind him where Senkyo’s belongings lie, but when Shiro peeked from his side, she saw all of Senkyo’s stuff was scattered on the ground. On top of her uneasiness added shock and anger as her mind processed what happened while she was knocked out.

“Y-Y-You monster! Shiro remembers you! You’re that impudent bastard that got rejected by his crush!”

“HEY! Where did ya get that from!?”

Although she was fuming, Shiro didn’t have time to argue around with him. She ran over to Senkyo’s bags and returned everything in the bags neatly. In her arranging, she saw an item that didn’t belong to Senkyo, a translucent gem and a map of the town. She took a few moments of silence to rack her mind at what it could be. When realization struck her, she became even more agitated than before.

“Hey, you over there! Take Shiro to the Konjou clan! This rooftop is a teleportation circle right!? Come on then, we don’t have much time!”

“I don’t know ya know that, but even if ya say so, I have no clue who ya are. There’s no way I’m goin’ to let a stranger enter the castle.”

Infuriated, Shiro poured down all her stress on the person who refused to cooperate with her.

“LISTEN HERE, YOU GOOD-FOR-NOTHING SCOUNDREL! SHIRO NEEDS YOU TO TAKE HER TO THE CASTLE SO SHE CAN REPORT THIS TO YOUR CHIEF AND GET REINFORCEMENTS TO SAVE ONII-C—S-SENKYO! IF YOU DON’T HURRY UP, SHIRO WILL MAKE SURE THAT YOU WILL NEVER GET HOOKED UP WITH YOSHIKO-SAN!”

“W-Wha…!?”

Haruto was perplexed by Shiro’s fury and rendered him silent for a moment. That gave him enough time for his mind to pick up that whatever she was saying was serious and that she was likely not an enemy. Having been forced to take the situation a bit more seriously, he finally gave in and agreed to send them to the castle.

“Fine, fine, I got it. Hahh… I won’t be able to lock the door from this side. Does this mean I’ll need to come back? Whatever… damn doors.”

The two arrived at the castle and hurried their way to the chief’s quarters. Shiro quickly went over the situation and requested backup. The clan chief, Yousuke, nodded understandingly and made a quick summary of her report.

“I see. So basically, Hisho-kun betrayed Yukou-kun and is taking him to this place on the map where she’s going to take him to Zerid.”

“Yes! This gem right here is a Traveler’s Gem! It can send you between Earth and Zerid! Even if we don’t stop them from leaving, we can still chase after them! So please, send your units to help Onii-chan!”

Yousuke remained silent. He was racking his brain so hard that the tense aura around him prevented anyone from disturbing his train of thought. After a short while, he came to a decision.

“Right now, most of our hunters are out on missions. The only ones left that can help you are the ones on patrol. But since they’re too far away, we can’t contact them. I want you two to seek Sakurai-dono’s assistance. Tell him to contact Ryosei and all the patrol near the area. Now go, make haste!”

“Thank you!”

Shiro and Haruto bowed their heads and quickly headed to Kosuke’s quarters where they quickly explained the situation.

**…………**

The sky was turning dark and night was upon them. In the less populated area of town, Ryosei was standing in front of Yukai’s apartment door and was just about to leave.

“Thank you for today, Ryosei-nii-san. You really helped me with my studies. With this, I feel like I can actually get perfect scores now.”

“Haha, can’t wait to see it. Good luck out there.”

Ryosei raised his fist and pointed it to Yukai. She responded accordingly and bumped her fist with his and made a happy giggle as she did. Seeing her like that brought a smile to Ryosei’s face and bid her farewell.

“Looks like she’s finally brightening up. She’s become much less reserved around me. That’s great and all… but still…”

The image of Yukai’s bedridden mother flashed in his mind. Remembering the curse that was contaminating her body sent chills down his spine. He couldn’t help but become worried.

“I need to find something to cure her. I don’t know how much time I have left. But even so… Shiro won’t be able to help since this isn’t related to magic. It’s a curse from a spirit. I’ve been searching the spirit realm for so long but nothing showed up… Agh, maybe I have no other choice but to confront the spirits at that café after all…”

While his mind was occupied by the worry of the curse inflicted on Yukai’s mother, a voice echoed in his head.

*“\*Ryosei, can you hear me?\*”*

It was Kosuke. Although he was the same person that spearheaded exiling him from the clan when he was alive, it didn’t seem like Kosuke held the same resentment in the past. In fact, it seems like he was a bit nicer to him ever since the battle royale.

*“\*I’m here, Sakurai-ojii-san. What is it?\*”*

*“\*It’s urgent. Yukou Senkyo has been abducted by Hisho Yuu. I need you to go to the Joe n’ Nathan’s a few blocks down. We have a teleport point there. I already informed them where to send you, just come quickly. She’ll explain the situation to you.\*”*

From a sudden contact from the Connect network arrived shocking news and headed straight to Joe n’ Nathan’s. Despite the contents of the news, Ryosei didn’t express shock, but anger. This was because the situation was not outside of *\*their\** prediction. After arriving home yesterday, Senkyo shared his memories with Ryosei, and that is when he picked up on Yuu’s hints of betrayal.

**…………**

“\*Senkyo, you know what this means, right?\*”

“Yep, I do. She’s was already giving a few hints, but after today, it might as well be certain. Hisho-chan will probably betray us.”

Yuu had been acting strange lately. Something was bothering her, but she didn’t want anyone to take notice of that, but her honest nature leaked her intentions. One of the most notable actions that brought upon this conclusion was her recent interest in Senkyo’s view on lies and her apologetic attitude earlier that night.

“\*Then we have to—\*”

“Stop.”

Senkyo cut Ryosei off with a heavy, curt tone. The message’s contents included an impenetrable iron wall that didn’t have a single intention of moving aside for others, Ryosei included, and of course, this shocked him.

“\*W-What!? Why not!?\*”

Even though they are in the same body, they couldn’t hear each other’s thoughts. At the end of the day, Senkyo and Ryosei were two different souls.

“You saw it, right? She was genuinely sad. She, herself, doesn’t want to do this, but something is forcing her to. I’ll find out what it is and do something about it.”

“\*Are you insane!? For all we know she’s an assassin plotting to kill you! Let’s not take any chances and—\*”

“I will not let you or anybody else lay a finger on her.”

A tone as cold as the lowest climate of the north, emanating a heavy portent of calamity, seething with so much emotion that it was overflowing to Ryosei, instilling fear deeper than any other source. If it weren’t for the fact that Ryosei was an experienced fighter that lived through many life-and-death situations, as well as death itself, he would not have been able to utter a word. It was also because of those senses that he knew Senkyo was being serious. If he continued to argue with him, it would end on anything but a happy note. So instead, he decided to respond with a witty retort.

“\*W-Wow… so this is what they call blind love… I guess not even you are protected from its madness, huh?\*”

Although it sounded offensive at face value, it was Ryosei’s way of warning him of the stupidity he was doing, an act of concern for Senkyo, which Senkyo perceived through emotions as Ryosei said so, quelling his anger. After sensing Ryosei was letting him go as he wished, Senkyo tried to reassure him and off the conversation in a positive light.

“Don’t worry. I haven’t lost my sense of justice. If I determine that she is a lost cause, I’ll end what I started with my own two hands. I will guarantee you that.”

He vowed resolutely, leaving Ryosei with no choice but to accept his decision. If Senkyo dies traveling that road, then would deserve it as it was his own volition that sent him there. However, unbeknownst to Senkyo, Ryosei made a vow of his own.

**…………**

\*As a hunter of the Konjou clan, as the dead person you brought back to life, and as your friend, I will keep you away from taking the path I determine to lead to your certain doom, may it be from a prophecy or your love for the enemy. I will use the life you revived to bring you towards a happy life of your own!\*

He reached the family restaurant in less than a minute with his rushed sprint and successfully arrived at his destination. From bland white, but properly maintained walls, he became surrounded by solid wooden walls. The space he was in was only big enough to fit the teleporting circle. There was a single lamp outside that lit up the area. He left the small room and was greeted by Kosuke, and surprisingly, Shiro.

“Good you’re here.”

“With that intense message, anyone would come running in. Anyway, what’s the situation?”

“She will be filling you in as you go. We’re trying our best to hurry here, so we don’t have much time to waste. One of the hunters is already out calling everyone they can. I need to help out. It’s going to take at least five minutes for the reinforcements to arrive. Hold out until then.”

“Got it.”

Kosuke nods in satisfaction.

“Perfect. Now, take this with you. You know how to use it better than anyone.”

Sakurai hands Ryosei a katana with a black scabbard designed with red roses, easily recognizable from the time it’s been around him. Kuro Yaiba. He was a bit confused as to why he had it at first, but it didn’t take him long to piece together what happened after seeing Shiro in front of him instead of being inside Senkyo’s body. He shifts his gaze from the sword to Kosuke and bows before taking off.

“Understood. Shiro, let’s go!”

“Yes!”

Ryosei summons a ball of light to guide their way into the dark forest. Shiro filled Ryosei in on everything that happened that day that led to her betrayal. Their talk at lunch, her expressions, and the lines she remembered. Hearing her story made him bring a finger to his chin.

“Really now… I highly doubt this was something she planned a long time ago.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s because I didn’t sense any lies before. When we first met Hisho-chan, I even asked her directly…”

“I even asked her directly if she was an enemy or not” is what Ryosei was about to say, but then it hit him. When they first met Yuu, they never got to ask her that question. At another time, when they were faced with the dream demon, he only asked her if she was at fault for Yukai’s condition at the time. He never actually asked her if she was an enemy, which meant it wouldn’t have triggered his senses. It was then that another thought came to mind.

*“\*I thought that you might be who I'm looking for, so I decided to follow you everywhere you went. But if you defeated a werewolf, then that might explain it*…*\*”*

*“\*S-Sorry, I'm not supposed to tell anybody the reason.\*”*

Yuu’s true goal for coming to Earth.

*“\**…*Fine. However! I need you to agree to three conditions. If you don't agree to them, I won't tell you why I'm being chased.\*”*

*“\*I*… *I want to check if you have mana.\*”*

*“\*That's because*… *He might be who I'm looking for.\*”*

To find a true human mana wielder. And her plans for that person were…

*“\*Well*… *I don't know*… *At first, I planned to take that person to Zerid immediately but if Yukou-senpai is the mana wielder*… *I*… *I'm not sure*…*\*”*

To take them to Zerid. And the result of that inspection…

*“\*Oh, sorry I forgot to tell you… Yukou-senpai, you**… don't have any mana in you.\*”*

At that time, Ryosei didn’t sense any lies which only confused him even more. Even back in the Konjou clan, when Senkyo was knocked out by the pain of breaking his muscles, Ryosei was conscious. Yuu was about to bite his neck, but she didn’t commit to it.

There was either something he was missing that led to her finding out, or the even more inconceivable, Ryosei’s ability doesn’t work on Yuu. These thoughts filled his head, sending him to confusion.

It was true that Senkyo was the person Yuu was looking for. Senkyo and Ryosei were aware of that fact the moment they learned he could use mana without a spectral in one of his private practice sessions in his own home. Yet they still chose to let her stay close by.

Why they decided to take such a risk was simple, Senkyo took an interest in Yuu. It wasn’t until yesterday that he realized that fact, but to Ryosei, who was only a visitor to Senkyo’s body, he knew about it long ago. It was also yesterday that Ryosei decided to respect his decision and let a known risk pass by, in turn, he made a vow to himself to lead Senkyo to a happy life. But then, why was he away when Senkyo’s abduction happened? What reasons were there? Was it because he didn’t expect her to as so early? Maybe because Senkyo would suspect his actions? No, the reason was quite clear in his head. The vision of a dainty high school girl that he shared his pain with flashed in his mind, causing a black hole to temporarily squeeze his heart in.

“D-Damn it! I was too careless!”

“H-Hey! What are you shouting all of the sudden for!?”

Shiro was startled by Ryosei’s abrupt shout. After being consumed in his thoughts, he completely forgot that Shiro was right beside him.

“Sorry about that. But I just realized that we brought this situation on ourselves. Relationships are a tough thing to deal with, huh?”

“What are you even talking about?”

“You know what, never mind that. We were too lax and neglected the danger right beside us. Before you arrived here, Hisho-chan asked us to check Senkyo if he had mana. We carelessly agreed in exchange for information, but now it’s coming to bite us back.”

Ryosei shared his thoughts. However, she didn’t react poorly like he first expected to, on the contrary, she even denied that thought.

“That’s impossible.”

“What?”

“If it happened when Shiro wasn’t released yet, then what you’re saying is impossible. That’s because Onii-chan’s mana was locked along with Shiro.”

Ryosei’s eyes widened. He was reminded just how mysterious the person he was living with was. The person beside her was also a subject of questioning. Senkyo, who doesn’t know what he is capable of, the catgirl from another world that knew his secrets but keep them hidden, and the enigmatic man known as his father who brought all of this together. He shook his head in an attempt to remove his curiosity and returned to the subject at hand.

“Then how do you think she found out about Senkyo’s mana?”

“Most likely, it was from witnessing the power of the Divine Soul of the Spirits. To use the power of a divine soul, a source of mana is needed. When Shiro first woke up, Shiro witnessed Onii-chan chant the call for his divine soul. Throughout his call, and the times he used his magic, Onii-chan wasn’t holding a spectral. A fellow Angel like Yuu-chan would notice.”

“I-I see…”

The Divine Soul of the Spirits. It was the one Ryosei talked to at the end of the battle royale. They could control the memories that get transferred between him and Senkyo. Another questionable entity. Ryosei let out an exasperated sigh after hearing all of that. Right now wasn’t the time to worry about that, so he let it all out with a huge sigh and concentrated on the path in front of him.

In the distance, they could finally see flashing lights and hear large rumbling. There seemed to be a fight going on so they laid low and observed from afar. They could see Yuu flying in the air, a skeleton jumping from tree to tree while carrying a bag of spears behind its back, and a fully armored guard that was preventing Yuu from getting close to Senkyo, who was tied inside a barrier behind it.

“W-What’s happening here? Who are these people?”

Shiro voiced her thoughts as she watched the two parties battling. Ryosei kept quiet and analyzed the situation. They were clearly fighting over Senkyo, but just because the other party was going against Yuu didn’t mean they were allies. With that in mind, he made a decision.

“We’re going to sneak around behind them and release Senkyo. This is the perfect time since they’re preoccupied with each other. Follow me, but be quiet.”

“Okay.”

Ryosei and Shiro lurked in the shadows, slowly making their way to Senkyo. The other three were too engrossed with each other to notice them. At this rate, they would release Senkyo without having any trouble. That was until Shiro noticed a small area on the tree next to Ryosei began to distort.

She immediately tackled Ryosei the moment she noticed it. Not a second later, a twisted branch sprouted out of the tree and pierced the area Ryosei was previously standing on. The sudden occurrence caused a whole commotion and caught the attention of the other three.

“Ryosei-san… Shiro-chan…”

Yuu inadvertently breathed out their names. Meanwhile, the two skeletons talked among themselves in the same strange language.

“Aoavvadrdrlr… Pqxe iia pq iia Xel?”

(Reinforcements… Xel, what do we do?)

“Iiasi! Regrn, lrbk ha j lrdr krnpq jdr. Oarel bkdr lrdr mssioadr xe ent.”

(Damn it! Regrn, take care of the new ones. I’ll keep the vampire at bay.)

“Cziiaalrj.”

(Understood.)

The armored skeleton shifted its attention to Ryosei and Shiro and charged at them with its warhammer. In response, Ryosei simply stood there and observed his opponent with his hand firmly gripped on his weapon. The skeleton reached attacking distance and lunged as it brought its warhammer down on Ryosei. However, it only reached the flat ground.

Before it could even notice, Ryosei passed by him. He was like a light feather dancing with the wind. It was so quick that the skeleton thought he just did that for the sake of dodging his attack, but when it tried to turn around to face him, its lower body didn’t respond, instead, it lost its balance and fell to the ground, splitting its armor into two and snuffing out the red flame inside its helmet in the process.

“K-Krnpqt… Yui pqxe uiwodr!?”

(I-Impossible… What was that speed!?)

The hooded skeleton stood in shock, but it soon realized it didn’t have the time to indulge in that luxury the moment Ryosei turned to it. Having seen his tremendous power, it became flustered, but still managed to create a barrier for itself and began to chant.

“J Pqhdr Pqlrfi, Oa enuidrfi tcz relsilrui wopqa vva si drdr fims jdrdr. Hadr lrdr jdr pqjxedr pqjgiia cz xeiia iiaoadr sireluikrn lraczfi lrdra fixelr. Hoawooag Iiahoadr!”

(O Wicked Witch, I beseech your limitless power for my eyes have opened. Curse the ones who’ve wronged us and drive malison through their hearts. Crippling Decline!)

Although it chanted something, nothing seemed to happen at all. It then grabbed a spear one after another and threw them at Ryosei, making an impassible wall of spears. Ryosei charged in lightning speed and jumped in the small spaces between the spears, weaving through each one like needle and thread. Those that were in his way were cut down in a blink of an eye. He maintained his momentum and accelerated towards the skeleton.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind.\*”*

He swung his blade and passed the skeleton, destroying its barrier in the process. But that wasn’t all, a powerful gust of wind accompanied his strike, pushing the skeleton backward and pulling him up a few inches into the air. It couldn’t do anything the moment it was airborne, and from behind it emerged a black blade.

*“\*Magic Arts: Chained Blade!\*”*

Ryosei slashed the back of his blade and stopped himself the moment it made contact with the enemy’s bones. It was a simple touch, and it didn’t hurt the skeleton whatsoever. But that light tap implanted the skeleton with a binding effect that prevented its bones to move.

With the skeletons taken care of, Ryosei turned to the other barrier that was encasing Senkyo. He shattered it whole with a single, focused strike from Kuro Yaiba and released his binds. Being unconscious, he fell to the ground but was caught in time by Shiro.

“Thank god… Onii-chan is safe. Shiro is going to take off the sleeping magic cast on him.”

“Good.”

“O Graceful Healer, cleanse us of the ailments that curse our bodies. Gather your power for those that impede our path. Purify!”

Shiro brought her hand above Senkyo’s chest and cast her spell. A few seconds later, his eyes sloppily opened like it was his first wake in the early morning.

“Ryosei…? Shiro…?”

Those very eyes then flung open in surprise when Shiro threw herself at Senkyo and locked him in a tight embrace. He was thrown into confusion the very moment he woke up.

“H-Hey, Shiro? What’s happening here? Shiro?”

No matter how many times he called out, he was ignored. By the looks of it, she was too focused on her hugging to notice. Which was why he turned to the other person next to him for answers.

“R-Ryosei?”

He called out to him and responded with a slight nod.

“She finally acted. What do you plan to do now?”

Ryosei said curtly but Senkyo didn’t seem the least bit surprised. He anticipated this, after all. The only reason he asked was out of desperation. Senkyo wanted to find out Yuu’s circumstances before this happened, but she acted too early for him to even begin doing so. Now being in a precarious position, he answered honestly.

“I have no idea.”

Such blunt honesty stifled Ryosei and even Shiro who was busy rubbing her head against his chest.

“But just like I promised yesterday, I’ll be the one to handle her.”

He finally stood up and locked his eyes with Yuu. Just as he was about to walk forward, Ryosei stepped in his way.

“Don’t you get it, Senkyo? She’s been playing us this whole time. She knew about you before she even suggested to ‘guard’ you. Her confession earlier on the rooftop was just a farce to let your guard down! She played with your feelings!”

Senkyo’s eyes turned cold and eyed Ryosei with those threatening eyes. His aura was so heavy that it even made Shiro flinch. However, after a deep breath of fresh air, Senkyo forced himself to return to normal, forcing a stop to his anger that was about to be poured on the wrong person. Ryosei was only concerned about him which is why he was doing this, and Senkyo realized that.

“Then, I guess we’ll find out if that’s true at the interrogation table.”

He passed Ryosei, heading to Yuu who was hovering in the night sky.

“Senkyo!”

“Trust me, Ryosei. While I handle this, how about you get information from that other skeleton. I don’t know who that is, but seeing as your mana is wrapped around its body, I’m sure he’s not the friendliest one in the neighborhood.”

The strain in Ryosei’s face showed that he was quite vexed. He hurried here with anger in hand, ready to cut down the traitor that abducted him, but for some reason, he couldn’t easily go against his word. Was it because he had been in his body for too long? No, that would be nonsense, but it was true that he let Senkyo go. If he pointed out the most probable cause, it would probably be because of the possibility that Yuu truly didn’t plan to hurt him, but just needed him. He had no idea, and in their current situation, there were only a few sources of information to go by.

With that in mind, he reluctantly disregarded her dissatisfaction and returned his focus on the skeleton that he disabled earlier. He came up behind it and placed his blade on its neck bone, speaking in a threatening tone all the while.

“I’m going to start with you. Tell me why you’re here, if not, I’ll kill you.”

The skeleton stayed silent.

“Hey! I’m talking to you!”

“Why don’t you calm down?”

Shiro called out to him from behind, disrupting his questioning attempt. He breathed a sign as he turned his head slightly behind him.

“Hahh… Why are you here? Shouldn’t you stick with Senkyo? He might do something crazy, you know?”

“Onii-chan said he wanted to go alone. Besides, Shiro believes in Oni-chan. Shiro isn’t too sure about Yuu-chan anymore, but if she is really being forced to do this, and she still wants to stay friends… then Shiro wouldn’t mind that.”

“Haahh… Seriously, every single one of the Yukou family is stubborn to no end. Well, not that I’m any different. Ugh, I’ve gone soft.”

Ryosei let out a defeated sigh. Even though he wanted to finish this quickly through the language of combat, he was outnumbered by the two most affected by the situation. If this is their decision, then it made it even harder for him to act. He decided to indulge the two, but only until he saw danger in the situation.

“Then if you have something that can make this guy talk that would be great.”

“The problem isn’t that they don’t want to talk. They don’t understand you to begin with. Let Shiro handle this.”

Shiro cleared her throat and then…

“Uidrdrj. Pqxe tcz xedr fia? Pqxe tcz uidr lroa wodra vva? Oavv xeuidr krnj lrfi, tcz pqrel en bkreldr.”

(Skeleton. What did you come here? What do you want from the person you tied up? If you don’t answer, we will kill you.)

It was the same language that Ryosei heard from the skeletons earlier. Since both of them were from the same world, it wasn’t strange that they spoke the same language, but he was still a bit surprised hearing Shiro speak it. Although they were from another world, the existence of another language slipped his mind since Yuu, Shiro, and Freda, the only people he knew from Zerid, always spoke in Japanese.

The skeleton finally responded, but not in the way Shiro expected. It scoffed at her; fear was absent in his actions.

“Bkrel? tcz pqrel? Oa uixelrdr, lrdr pqaiia Nemiyoak uixe pqfi. Enlr relj reloa oa xevva oakrnj krndrdr! Hahahaha!”

(You, kill me? I was startled when I saw a Nemian on this world. But looks like I have nothing to worry about! Hahahaha!)

“What did he say?”

Ryosei asked Shiro when the skeleton stopped speaking. Although looking at her slightly annoyed face, he wasn’t expecting much.

“Looks like they don’t plan on telling us anything. Shiro will keep communicating. Could you help by threatening him more or something?”

“A hard head, huh? I’ll take care of this—”

Ryosei cut himself short and immediately took hold of Kuro Yaiba. The source of his panic was in the air, rushing at him at breakneck speed. It was a magic attack created by Yuu.

A few minutes earlier, on Yuu and Senkyo’s confrontation.

“Yo, Hisho-chan”

“Senpai… Are you mad?”

Yuu made an awkward smile as she said so, clearly perplexed about the situation. In contrast, Senkyo answered bluntly, showing no mixed feelings about the situation.

“No. How could I be? I expected this to happen. I just didn’t think it would happen so early.”

“What?! How!?”

“Wait, did you seriously think you were hiding anything? With all your actions you might as well have been shouting your intentions.”

“I-I was that readable? N-No way…”

Seeing the genuine surprise on her face made Senkyo worry for her. She was honest to a fault, making her terrible for espionage missions. If all of this wraps up cleanly and everything returns to normal, Senkyo was thinking of giving Yuu some lessons for this subject.

“Well, there you have it. Hisho-chan, I won’t go easy on you. Now that the situation has come to this, you either stop this and tell us the truth or I’ll force you to. I know you don’t want to do this, so how about coming clean so we can help you? Even if the clan refuses to, I’ll be—”

“That’s the problem! If I do that, I’ll be relying on you again! I can’t do that! The only thing I want the least is to keep shoving my problems onto you. I have pride too, you know!? Even if you don’t mind, I do! Now, just let me handle this so everything can go back to normal! You don’t even need to do anything! I just need you to come to Zerid for just a little bit!”

“There’s going to be a bit of a problem with that. You see, my worries are a bit different from everyone else’s. You brought me here to go to Zerid, but along the way you encountered that skeleton over there that prevented that. That means someone knew you were going to bring me here and they intercepted you to go after me, if not, then they’re after the both of us. If we have targets on our backs, then it’ll be dangerous for you to do this alone!”

Senkyo’s statement made Yuu raise her ears. She was sure he was unconscious the whole time here and she never saw Ryosei enter his body, which meant that Senkyo was able to deduce the events that led them here and the danger that was ahead of Yuu.

“If you know that much then why are you even stopping me!? It’s dangerous so I’ll handle this myself!”

“You don’t get it! That’s all the more reason to help you! Just wait for at least another day until we convince the clan to give us some reinforcements!”

“I really don’t get it! Why are you trying to do this!?”

“That’s because I love you so fucking much that I can’t bear the idea of you dying while I sit idly by! So please, just stop being stubborn and let me help you!”

“Like I said—H-Huh!?”

Senkyo made her choke on her words, baffling her as her mind replayed his last message on repeat. Her lips twitched into a smile and her heartbeat began picking up pace, making her face redden, but before anything took complete form, she forcefully molded her lips to point downwards and stifled her heartbeats by clenching her chest.

“Y-You’re wrong! You’re mistaking that for some other emotion! L-Look carefully at a mirror you dumbass! If anyone here is stubborn that’s—!?”

As Yuu was about to return his words, something in her peripheral vision caught her attention and flicked her head towards it, bringing it to focus. Noticing this, Senkyo followed her eyes and both of them saw the skeleton Ryosei took down earlier was reconstructing itself. The spine of the skeleton extended at high speeds towards the other half and connected like two puzzle pieces, sealing the gap between them as if they were never cut in the first place. It turned its head to Ryosei who was busy trying to interrogate the other skeleton.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

Yuu quickly chanted and launched the hail of magic behind Ryosei, where the armored skeleton was heading. The air around her gathered and shaped themselves into long, sharp spikes that were inconspicuous within the darkness. Noticing a slight change in the breeze, Ryosei turned to see Yuu launching her magic at him. He instinctively reached for his sword, but before he could even defend, a metal clang came from behind him. He could feel his blade become restricted. Turning to his backside, there was a sinister skull with flames coming out of its eyeholes, clamming down on his blade. It was connected by a long vertebrate to a bone-like sickle on the other end. The said sickle and long vertebrate were being held by a skeleton with a scarred skull bathing inside a black flame, which strangely enough, lit up the area around him indicating his presence.

“Krnoa ycz hxeh! Fisi krnpq bkrel!”

(Now’s your chance! Kill him now!)

In response to that skeleton’s shout, the sound of rattling bones entered Ryosei’s ears. He tried to move his muscles, but contrary to his expectations, they didn’t respond. His body remained stationary no matter how many times his brain ordered it to move, almost as if he was in the middle of sleep paralysis.

*“\*W-What is this!? Some kind of magic!?\*”*

As he was stuck staring at the skeleton binding him, a giant set of armor eclipsed the skeleton's figure, and his eyes filled with fear as he saw a gigantic armored skeleton with its similar-sized warhammer brooding over his head, spelling his doom with the terrifying skull imbedded flatly on the head of the hammer.

Yuu’s Needle Storm was going to pass Ryosei and riddle the skeleton with holes. It was perfect timing. Her calculations were perfect, but then, several bony spears intercepted them and exploded, taking out all of Yuu’s magic.

Yuu and Senkyo turned over to the source and saw the skeleton that was bound earlier was moving freely and making new spears out of its own bones. They looked over to where it should have been and saw Shiro’s shoulder skewered to the ground by one of its spears. It looks like she tried to warn them, but magic was preventing her voice box to produce any sound, leaving them with the image of a screaming girl with her arm outstretched to them.

With nothing left to save him, the menacing red light from under its helmet was the last thing Ryosei saw before the hammer consumed him whole and crushed him under its weight. A dreadful slam reached the ears of everyone in the area and attracted their eyes, greeting them with a foul cloud of dust along with a hammer slightly sinking into the ground.

Everyone was left speechless, their eyes glued to the hammer, watching the dust around it slowly disperse. Metallic clunking accompanied the armored skeleton’s movements as it slowly pulled its hammer out of the ground. Grass, dirt, and rubble fell off from the face of the hammer, releasing yet another small cloud of dust. From under its hammer, it saw a rectangular depression, roughly outlining his hammer, as well as a black sword with a red streak down its center inside its own depression. However, there was no trace of the person he pulverized which made it think they somehow escaped, but before it could act on its thoughts, a flurry of strokes came from behind it, causing the illusion of a black streak of light snaking down its whole body.

Behind the towering armor’s body was a Ryosei dressed in a high school uniform brandishing a black blade, a spitting image of the one embedded in the dirt. Cold piercing eyes accompanied only with the fervor of battle. His wispy, black hair and the red string that decorated it fluttered in the air as he swung his last stroke.

His sword didn’t put a single scratch on its armor, suggesting that he missed all of his strokes, but the clanging of bones against metal that resounded right after begged to differ. The parts of its armor broke down to their separate pieces and exposed the disaster within. The bones of the skeleton were hacked off into small pieces and sprawled on the floor. After confirming his target was down, Ryosei disappeared into thin air almost as if he was never there in the first place.

“F-Fioa uioaoa!? I-Iiasi! Tcz sikrn hlrvv!”

(H-He’s a spirit!? D-Damn it! Cut off your mana!)

The scarred skeleton shouted in a panic. Immediately after that, the flames of the two other skeletons dissipated cutting off the light source that was marking them. In the shroud of darkness, the skeletons had their weapons at the ready, constantly searching their surroundings for a sneak attack from Ryosei.

The skeletons knew exactly what their enemy was. The experience they accumulated in their years of hunting gave them the ability to read the enemy, targets from other worlds were not an exception. A spirit with a status of revenant or higher. Their target returned to the spirit realm to evade the skeleton’s warhammer. Doing so didn’t require a chant which allowed him to escape even while cursed with magic. Since spirits are more powerful spirit power in the spirit realm compared to being in a different world, he cured his curse the moment he returned with spirit power. At this very moment, the spirit would be watching them through their glimpse ability. The moment he finds an opening…

The scarred skeleton then began chanting.

“J Pqhdr Pqlrfi, Oa enuidrfi tcz relsilrui wopqa vva si drdr fims jdrdr. Hadr lrdr jdr pqjxedr pqjgiia cz xeiia iiaoadr sireluikrn lraczfi lrdra fixelr…”

(O Wicked Witch, I beseech your limitless power for my eyes have opened. Curse the ones who’ve wronged us and drive malison through their hearts…)

It decided to stay stationary after finishing its chant, staring in a single direction into the darkness. Constantly spinning its skull-whip on one hand while carrying its bony sickle on the other. After a few seconds, a blade swung down at the center of the skeleton’s body, from its skull going down its spine all the way below its ribcage. However, at a closer inspection, Ryosei realized that his blade never pierced the skeleton in the first place. Its body was fully intact without any scratches, and his blade simply passed through its bones.

“–Hoawooag Iiahoadr!”

(–Crippling Decline!)

But before Ryosei could do anything in response, the skeleton’s skull lit up in the same black flame and cast his spell. It threw its skull-whip behind, spiraling around its body and biting Ryosei’s neck. The force of the blow caused him to fall to his side. The same effect happened earlier and rendered him motionless with its magic. The skeleton followed up its movements by pivoting on the ball of its foot to the opposite direction it threw its skull-whip, intercepting Ryosei’s fall with the blade of its bony sickle heading straight towards his neck.

Just like earlier, Ryosei disappeared and the skull that was biting on his neck fell to the ground with a dull thud, and its sickle reached nothing but thin air. However, the skeleton anticipated this. With the open hand it used to throw its skull-whip, it reached into its shawl and took out an opaque gem. Its sickle turned into a harpoon hook as the skeleton slashed the air below it using the opaque, flickering like a broken lightbulb as it stroked the gem, leaving a rift to another world, namely, the spirit realm where Ryosei would be. It then thrust its blade downwards into the rift, piercing anything in its way. A surprised expression appeared on the skeleton’s face as it felt nothing but dirt, it immediately turned around but with no one in sight.

“Damn it! What the hell is that thing!? That recovery was way too fast!”

The skeleton extinguished its flames and scanned the area around it. Its skeleton ally was keeping Yuu busy with the spears it keep producing from its body. Over at the side, the armored skeleton was regenerating its body. They were reduced to a million pieces so it was no wonder their revival was taking so long. Then, the sound of swift footsteps caught its attention. Over at the distance, the person they kept bound in ropes was freed from their restrictions and was making a mad dash towards the rectangular depression the armored skeleton left. It soon realized what they were after, but it was too late.

“Ryosei!”

Senkyo picked up Kuro Yaiba from the ground and called out to Ryosei. His shout was unneeded as the person he called out to already began manifesting himself and entering Senkyo’s body.

“He possessed him!?”

The scarred skeleton yelled out in shock at what he saw, stopping him from throwing his harpoon hook. A spear was hurling towards Senkyo as a feeble attempt to stop him, but with Ryosei’s spirit in control, he simply swung his blade and cut it cleanly in half.

In a blink of an eye, Ryosei, who had now returned to Senkyo’s body, dashed at breakneck speed towards Shiro who was about to take the spear pinning her to the ground. Immediately after freeing herself, the wind took her away from the spot that was soon pierced with more bony spears.

“Shiro, return to Senkyo’s body!”

“G-Got it!”

Shiro was clearly confused by the fast pace of the battle, so she obediently followed Ryosei’s orders and was sucked into Senkyo’s chest to avoid becoming a hindrance. After confirming no one else was in trouble, Ryosei took a stop and analyzed the enemy.

*“\*So, are these guys like the werewolf we fought before? Do I need to drain their mana or find some kind of weak spot?\*”*

*“\*I’m still not sure. Give me some time. Shiro, take care of Ryosei for me.\*”*

*“\*Got it, Onii-chan!\*”*

Having Ryosei left to his devices, he focused his gaze on the spear-thrower who launched a barrage of bony spears. Just like last time, he sped up and used flash strike to weave through the gaps of the spear. Unfortunately, the skeleton anticipated this.

“Draoaa tcz si uiaauiiia jrel. Lrbk lroa! –Oakrnlrj!”

(You only surprised me earlier. Take this! –Ignition!)

The cold, nighttime air around Ryosei suddenly ramped up to skin-peeling temperatures followed by a huge blast that would tear the skin like paper if they were directly hit. A cloud of black smoke clouded the area, obstructing the view of everyone trying to peer into it.

*“\*O-Oh…\*”*

Within the shroud, Ryosei looked around in a mix of surprise and embarrassment. His sword was angled to defend his front, but that wasn’t the reason why he was unharmed. In front of him was a glass wall with a tinge of blue, the magical barrier Shiro possessed.

*“\*Hey, what are you doing!? This is Onii-chan’s body you know!? That sword won’t do you any good if the attacks are coming from everywhere around you!\*”*

*“\*S-Sorry about that… Fighting in Senkyo’s body so suddenly got me a bit confused.\*”*

Ryosei bowed instinctively even though the person he was apologizing to was in his head. It had been a long time since Ryosei fought with Senkyo’s body. It was his first battle with him in a while and his fighting style abruptly shifted from his unrestricted spirit form to Senkyo’s undertrained body. He wouldn’t be able to fight properly without readjusting himself.

*“\*From what Shiro can tell, these skeletons can apply magic to their bones. It’s like an enhancer hunter. Don’t get too close to them.\*”*

*“\*Thanks for that.\*”*

Although Shiro doesn’t fight, she was still more knowledgeable about magic and Zerid creatures than Ryosei was. After doing a few stretches in the smoke to get a feel for Senkyo’s body again, Ryosei took a deep breath and entered his stance. As the smoke began to clear, he jumped out of it with flash strike, rushing into the spear-thrower once more.

“Czdrdrui!”

(It’s no use!)

The spear-thrower hurled another barrage at Ryosei, yet he didn’t show any signs of moving, in fact, his speed only increased.

*“\*What are you doing!? You can’t force your way through with speed! Shiro told you before, didn’t she!? They can apply magic in their bones! There’s no telling what magic that thing put in those!\*”*

Shiro shouted at Ryosei, trying to stop him from going through with his suicidal plan. However, he ignored her and only responded with a grin.

“Sheath my blade with the wind. Your power is the face of elegance. Flow as I show you the path, the path to an elegant ending. Konjou Style, Gale Fan!”

A strong, piercing wind extended horizontally into the spears, cutting every single one in its path. However, this wasn’t enough to take every single one out. The rest of the spears were still hurling at… nothing. The skeleton looked around in confusion, but Ryosei was nowhere to be found.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the skeleton, Ryosei raised his sword overhead after he sneakily went under the skeleton’s radar, or more appropriately, above it. From within the forest of darkness, he used flash strike to send himself high into the sky, towering over the barrage of spears and even more so. The black, starry sky served as his backdrop with the bright moon illuminating him from behind, outlining his figure and making a perfect silhouette of him.

*“\*Magic Arts: Heaven’s Blade!\*”*

Small sparks of lightning coiled his blade which then abruptly burst into a living thunderstorm, sending out bolts of lightning from the blade. The skeleton was directly below him, clueless of the impending lightning strike from above.

“Derg! Tcz xejdr!”

(Derg! Above you!)

The scarred skeleton roared, his scream overpowering all of the sounds in the dark forest. Ryosei didn’t need to know their language to figure out it was warning their ally about him. In response, the spear-thrower strained his neck bones upwards, Ryosei’s figure filling its empty eye sockets.

It quickly leaped backward with its spear in hand, ready to stab at Ryosei the moment he landed. Then, a sharp pain assailed its vertebrate, cutting it in half along with its spear. It was so focused on Ryosei that it forgot the lethal gust of wind approaching him from the front. Before it could even regenerate its bones, Ryosei demolished the ground in front of it, leaving a gaping crater in the middle of the forest, sending powerful shockwaves and a powerful electrical discharge, rendering it in a state of paralysis for a few seconds.

With its body split into two, and the electricity blocking the orders its brain was sending to its bones, or whatever kind of force was making it move, Ryosei took the chance to brandish his sword, ready to cut the skeleton down into finer pieces like a fish on a cutting board. But then, an ominous red light appeared from behind him along with a murderous gaze that made his hairs stand up. It was the armored skeleton. He immediately created an air foothold directly under his feet to jump upwards and distance himself from the danger.

Although he was able to save most of his body, he didn’t leave unscathed. Even upon using flash strike, its warhammer was able to hit his legs. An ear-piercing blast roared below him upon impact and tipped his form, causing him to spin out of control to the nearest tree. Right before impact, a strong gust of wind emerged from Ryosei’s back, negating the force and plopping him lightly on the ground below.

In that whole sequence, Ryosei never felt any pain. That was because of Shiro. While Ryosei was immersed in battle, she was vigilant of her surroundings, searching for any danger that would inflict pain on Senkyo’s body. One of these dangers was the armored skeleton. Since Ryosei and the skeleton was moving so quick, she wasn’t sure a warning would make it in time. Instead, she expanded her magical barrier and erected a normal one to negate both the magical and physical damage. Although that didn’t stop the force of the warhammer from transferring to Ryosei, she negated that as well with quick wind magic.

*“\*W-Wow, that was amazing. I didn’t feel a thing.\*”*

*“\*That’s only natural. When it comes to protecting Onii-chan, Shiro is number one!\*”*

After expressing his gratitude, Ryosei refocused his thoughts on his battle. He eyed the two skeletons from in front of him, the towering armored one, and the paralyzed one showing signs of regeneration. Suddenly, a long spine stretched from his side, coiling around him and restraining him, but before that happened, he cut down the spine from below and raced towards the scarred skeleton that launched its spine-whip, cutting the spine above him as he went.

The armored skeleton interrupted him by swinging its warhammer in the air, releasing a powerful gust of wind. Ryosei then stepped back to avoid it. The scarred skeleton approached the paralyzed one and uttered something under its breath, releasing the paralysis Ryosei inflicted on it and regenerating its body. The three skeletons were all back in action, their weapons at the ready, slowly shuffling to better position themselves.

In all honesty, the gust of wind he dodged earlier wouldn’t have caught him if he used flash strike, but he didn’t want to tire himself too much before Senkyo was able to figure out how to defeat the enemy. He didn’t need to cut down his enemies, he just needed to buy time. He retreated to the trees and kept his ground, using the trees as a shield for their attacks.

Meanwhile, within the confinements of skin and bones, the psychological realm in which memories and emotions reside, Senkyo was racking his head, collecting information and making connections.

Of course, before he began, he asked Shiro about everything she knew about the skeletons. But due to her confined lifestyle in their village as a child and her sudden adaptation from Zerid to Earth, she didn’t know any other species besides the major ones like vampires. Skeletons were unknown to her. All she could do was speculate just like Senkyo and conclude that they can use magic through their bones just like enhancer hunters.

*“\*Let’s see… Ryosei’s first attack was on the armored skeleton. He was a spirit form at the time, so normally, any and all physical objects should be untouchable for him. But then why was he able to carry around Kuro Yaiba? Does it have anything to do with him being its wielder? No, never mind that, I need to focus here.\*”*

Senkyo recalled Ryosei’s first engagement with the enemy. Although he never saw it, Ryosei’s memories transferred to him the moment he returned to his body. He scrutinized the armored skeleton using his spirit vision. Since he was unable to use his eyes, he was given the sight that Ryosei used to navigate when he still hadn’t met Senkyo. The world around him was pitch-black, a canvas of darkness. But when he focused hard enough to use his spirit vision, the canvas was decorated with white lines of all kinds of curves and strokes, creating a very detailed outline of their surroundings, like a manga that was drawn with white ink on black paper. Fortunately for him, there was no concept of light in this vision, making it so that the trees at far distances were still clear to him despite them being devoid of light. This allowed him to clearly see an important detail on the skeleton’s armor. There was only a single cut in it. It was the Ryosei inflicted using Kuro Yaiba on its physical form.

Senkyo could recall multiple times of Ryosei drove his sword through the skeleton’s armor, yet his blade only pierced the skeleton’s bones and left its armor unscathed. At that time, he was using his spirit blade, meaning it also wouldn’t make contact with physical objects, but that didn’t signify its bones weren’t physical, since it was penetrated by a physical sword as well.

There was only one possibility. Shiro was correct. The skeletons can send mana through their bones, which meant that spirits can make contact with anything that contained mana. For a split second, an image of Yukai appeared in his head, but then he banished the idea before his train of thought went off course. Right now, he needed to find the skeleton’s weakness.

Senkyo’s focus shifted from the armored skeleton to the scarred one. Its skull was bathed in a burning black flame, looking all the more terrifying as he waved his bony harpoon hook.

*“\*This one seems to be their leader. It can speak both Japanese and Zeldian. Those flames… it ordered its allies to cut off their mana the moment they found out Ryosei is a spirit. These goons aren’t your normal bounty hunters. They know how to fight beings from other worlds.\*”*

Senkyo inwardly expressed a slight fear and respect. Their enemies were clearly not newcomers.

*“\*Hm?\*”*

Senkyo’s attention was caught by the scar that crossed over its left eye socket. It had been present there the very first time he laid his eyes on him. Although these skeletons could regenerate at an insane speed, for some reason, the scar on its skull didn’t make a single attempt to do so. There was a possibility the skeleton left it there as some kind of fashion design, but he highly doubted that was the case.

*“\*Ryosei! Go for their skulls! They can’t regenerate them!\*”*

*“\*Oh, that was quick! Got it!\*”*

Although the intensity of their fight jumbled up their sense of time, it was barely even 3 minutes the moment Ryosei entered Senkyo’s body. In response to Senkyo’s order, Ryosei turned his head to the closest enemy, the spear thrower. His sharp glare delivered his full intent to the skeleton. Preparing for his attack, the skeleton mumbled numerous times and drove five spears into the ground with him in the center, followed by another murmur, creating a barrier around it. Having witnessed this, Shiro gave Ryosei a warning.

*“\*Be careful! Those spears can activate on their own. The moment you get close to them, whatever magic it applied in them will activate.\*”*

*“\*Is that so…? Then, I’m going to need Enhance Speed and one physical barrier.\*”*

*“\*W-What!? You’re not planning on going straight in, are you!?\*”*

*“\*Heh, that’s exactly what’s going to happen. If you really are number one, then I better be in one piece after this is over.\*”*

*“\*T-This is insane… Onii-chan…\*”*

Her voice echoed in disbelief. Even after seeing the number of defenses, Ryosei had to go through, he was eager to charge straight in. Senkyo could picture an image of Shiro looking at him with upturned eyes, seeking permission to go through with the plan. He agreed, causing Shiro to cast her spells reluctantly.

The moment she uttered her last spell he charged straight into the three skeletons. The time she spent casting gave the enemy enough time to make a defensive formation around the spear thrower. Seeing as there were other targets closer to him, it would’ve been smarter to switch targets and take care of the spear-thrower later. But there was one factor different from earlier: he didn’t need to hold back. With the goal of a swift takedown, in order to show off, he began chanting.

“Remnants of the past, become my incarnate and bring upon the shadow of war. I call out the penumbra of the lurking devils. Konjou Style, Phantom Blade!”

A dark cloud burst from where Ryosei stood, concealing an ample area of the forest, and with the help of the darkness, it simply looked like he was swallowed by it. Suddenly, three shadows emerged from the cloud, rushing straight into the skeletons without showing any signs of stopping.

For a moment, the skeletons were struck with confusion. Three Ryoseis completely identical to each other were approaching them from different directions. When they snapped out of their daze, the scarred skeleton threw out its spine-whip at the one approaching from the far left.

Whether that Ryosei was the real one or not, he was still able to react and cut the spine-whip down before it completely encircled him. The skeleton’s weapon was already badly damaged from Ryosei’s earlier attack. The skull end of the weapon was already lost and its range was shortened substantially. The skeleton knew what would happen if it used its body to block him. Since it didn’t want that outcome, it simply stood at the sidelines, letting the Ryosei pass.

While the scarred skeleton let the Ryosei pass, the armored skeleton dealt with two. It charged its hammer and blocked the path of the Ryosei closing in the center, swinging its hammer as it arrived. The Ryosei attempted to block using its sword but was overpowered by the force and crushed into the ground.

Lifting up its hammer, there was no trace of Ryosei. Since it was using Senkyo’s body it wouldn’t be able to do the same trick from earlier, meaning it was a fake. With incredible speed, it mumbled a chant and closed the gap between it and the Ryosei at the far right. He managed to evade the initial swing, but it was immediately followed up by a bone-crushing gust of wind, reducing the Ryosei to a cloud of smoke. It was another fake.

The armored skeleton turned to its ally, tracing its gaze, it saw Ryosei about to reach the edge of the spear thrower’s barrier. There was no way to reach him now, even with the help of its superhuman speed. Sliced-up bone spears sprawled behind Ryosei, showing the spear thrower’s multiple attempts to keep him at bay. Alas, it was unsuccessful.

At the edge of the barrier, Ryosei took form, standing still as he did so. The spear-thrower hurled one last spear at his head the moment he stood still. Just when it thought it landed a hit, the booming sound of shattering glass reverberated in the skeleton’s ear, a sharp blade covered its vision, and a powerful eruption of electricity ran through every bone in its body, charging every bone-piece with electricity as it’s skull shattered into a million pieces.

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap.\*”*

Ryosei crashed straight through the barrier with a flash strike. He didn’t get blocked by the barrier. He used a physical barrier of his own to take the impact for him. With the help of greater force and a stronger barrier, his barrier broke through the skeleton’s and enabled him to strike it down.

If the other skeletons possessed eyes, they would widen in shock at the performance before them. Suddenly, an unknown force was binding his muscles, preventing them from moving any further. A crown of ice, that stretched higher than the trees surrounded him, followed by a massive explosion and a large, rock spike emerged from the ground within the ice cage, towering over the initial crown.

At the tip of that spike laid Ryosei pierced through the chest, displaying him for everyone in the area to see. Not long after, the ground below the massive death structure distorted and began melting. From solid, brown dirt and rock, the ground around it turned to a viscous liquid, a mixture of yellow, orange, and red dyeing the liquid and emitting a scorching heat that melted the structure in its center. Molten lava.

The other two skeletons stared blankly at the sight, stupefied from the string of magic spells their ally prepared. Their mission was to bring Senkyo alive, in other words, they failed. But that realization was overcome by sadness as they took a moment of silence to mourn the loss of their ally.

Then, that sadness immediately reverted back into shock with the mixture of fear and anger the moment they took another look at the tip of the structure. Ryosei was now gone from the tip of the rock spike that once held him through the chest. A familiar voice called out from behind them, their fear hidden behind a tall wall of intense anger.

“Do you get it now? We’re the hunters of this world, not you.”

They turned their heads, their skulls sending Ryosei a death glare with their eyeless, skull cavity complimented by their flame, raging in response to their emotional state.

“Y-YOU BASTARD! WHAT KIND OF MONSTER ARE YOU!?”

The skeleton shot his words at Ryosei who was standing by a tree, completely unharmed. He replied curtly, sending only hints to his trick.

“What? Did you just assume that I was charging along with my illusions?”

It was then that they realized. The moment the three Ryoseis appeared, the dark cloud was still standing, concealing everything within. They were too focused on stopping his attack to realize that all three Ryoseis were an illusion, and the real one right behind them, controlling the illusions he sent out.

“YOU ROTTEN DEMON! HOW DO YOU EVEN HAVE ENOUGH POWER TO CREATE AND MOVE THOSE ILLUSIONS! THAT CHANT WAS TOO SHORT TO HAVE THE POWER OF A HIGH-TIER SPELL!”

. He returned the skeleton’s glare with his own, creating a face of the cold tundra with eyes burning with rage greater than the skeletons’, arousing the fear behind their anger.

“Do you really think you’re in the situation to be speaking to me like that? How about you take a look around your surroundings and know your place.”

The scarred skeleton inadvertently took a step back, reluctantly straining its neck upwards looking at the trees above. Its mouth opened agape and its anger slowly turned into fear. The trees were scattered with people wearing black clothing and various weapons in their hands. The hunters that Shiro requested had arrived. They surrounded the enemy, some perched on the trees while others were spread on the ground.

A sole hunter donning the brute uniform consisting of a black Gi took Ryosei’s side.

“This is Hashimoto Haruto, commander of Rescue Battalion A. We have Battalion B scattered in the forest, sealing any way of escape and preventing any further enemies from entering. Meanwhile, Battalion C is erecting a barrier around the perimeter to prevent any bystanders from approaching or seeing inside. As a direct order from Elder Sakurai Kosuke, the command will be transferred to you. What shall we do?”

For a moment, Ryosei was nonplussed at Haruto’s speech pattern and attitude. He didn’t meet with him directly, but he knew about him from Senkyo’s memories and what he did one time at the rooftop. The attitude he was taking now was a far cry from Senkyo’s past encounter with him. It seems like he has different personalities for work and leisure time. But after hearing his prim and proper report as he kneeled on one leg in front of him, he couldn’t help but doubt his memories. He shook his head lightly, snapping himself out of his daze and focused on the situation.

“I need one of those skeletons restrained for interrogation. It would be best if we catch both of them, but if needed, I permit you to kill one of them. Their skull is their weak spot; break that and they’ll die. Target their bodies from optimal suppression. After that…”

Ryosei shifted his gaze from Haruto towards the sky, where Yuu was still watching them, and quickly turned back to Haruto.

“Keep that vampire from escaping. We’ll be restraining her next.”

“Understood.”

Haruto closed his eyes, focusing deeply on his thoughts. Ryosei could tell he was relaying his order to the rest of the hunters using Connect. After a few seconds, the hunters moved to position themselves and readied their weapons, awaiting the commander’s attack order.

Meanwhile, when the scarred skeleton first noticed the horde of enemies hidden within the trees, it began to panic, looking around restlessly for a way to escape. Then, it remembered that it didn’t need to break through the sea of enemies. Its skull turned to its shawl, staring at a pocket inside the cloth where two Traveler’s Gems laid. An opaque gem and a white gem that seemed to be flickering like a broken lightbulb at irregular intervals.

It could escape right then and there. But the image of a terrifying figure sitting leisurely atop a glamorous throne flashed in his head, the client of the mission they were in. The skeleton ground his teeth, ruing the day it decided to accept his mission.

From its side came the armored skeleton, it's one last ally. It extended its metal hand towards him, his curled-up fist slowly opening up and revealing a dark orb of some sort.

“Enaj, oa fims lroa.”

(Enaj, I have this.)

“Lrxe pqxe?”

(What is that?)

“Rela vvj gvv. Fi lroa si, lr enlrrel, czdr lroa.”

(A gift from the Lord. He told me I should use this in battle.)

The scarred skeleton stared at it, trying to weigh out his options to make a decision. But Ryosei didn’t allow that and ordered the other hunters to take position. The rustling of leaves and swift movements from shadowy figures caused the skeleton to rush his decision.

“Xeaglr! Lrt gms czdr!”

(Alright! Give it a try!)

Reaching a decision, the armored skeleton took off its helmet, revealing its flaming red skull, and brought up the dark orb to his mouth and swallowed it. A few of the hunters saw the act and reported it immediately to Haruto, causing him to order everyone to hold their positions and observed them.

     A few seconds of silence passed, the tension in the air weighing down on everyone present, awaiting the results of the skeleton’s actions. Then, a vile wave of energy passed through everyone. The hunters were quite familiar with this feeling. It was something that evil spirits would usually secrete in an attempt to terrify the weak, but most of all, it was used to release their limits on their body.

     Sounds of metal clunking could be heard from the armored skeleton, which then sharpened to a loud clang as the armor on its body bent all over and broke into multiple metal fragments. It then became apparent that the skeleton was increasing its size at a fast pace until it towered over the trees, becoming just over three times their size. The hunters managed to fall back before the skeleton’s feet flattened them in its growth.

     Its skull was ablaze in a ginormous red flame, lighting up the sky above. If it weren’t for the barrier the other hunters activated, the skeleton would’ve become a colossal beacon for all to see and fear. It turned its skull around, looking for something. Its empty eye pockets aligned with Yuu, who was hovering in the sky watching the skeleton’s transformation. Yuu sensed the danger upon her and evaded as a skeletal hand came to swat her from the sky.

     “O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

     The air around her gathered into multiple sharp spikes comprising of deadly hurricanes and launched them towards its skull. Along with the storm, she accompanied it with a fireballs and chunky rocks firing at breakneck speed, most of them traveled on their own, but others merged with her initial needle storm and produced a flaming hurricane of heavy stone. The intense heat of the flame hurricane then melted the rocks inside, turning into lava. The skeleton defended itself with its arms which took the blow of the lava storm. Its bones began to melt, but its regeneration was far superior, making it look like nothing happened.

     While the skeleton was busying itself with Yuu, the hunters below took that chance to rearrange themselves into a new formation.

     “FORMATION TITAN E! REQUEST ASSISTANCE TO BATALLION B!”

     Haruto barked orders, causing the rest of the hunters to move accordingly. Units wearing cloaks, coats, and robes placed themselves within the trees. These hunter classes were enhancers, ranged fighters, and casters, respectively. Casters and ranged fighters raised their weapons, casting spells to empower their weapons and magic to throw at the giant before them. Meanwhile, enhancers sealed the attackers inside a barrier, protecting them from attacks and creating a small mountain range of protective barricades within the shroud of trees. Following that, they used their spirit power to enhance their allies’ attacks with blessings to further increase their effectiveness, later taking up their own weapons to help attack the enemy.

     A flurry of magic and ranged attacks bombarded the skeleton from all sides, making it impossible to defend against all of them, but even with all the successful hits, it was barely taking any scratches. Annoyed with the hunters, it shifted its attention to the ants below it and attempted to move its leg to stomp over them. However, contradictory to its expectations, its leg refused to move. Craning its neck even further down below, it saw a cluster of hunters under multiple barriers tightly gripping on its feet, weighing it down heavily. It was surprised to see such tiny vermin able to weigh heavier than its colossal body.

     All of the hunters restraining the skeleton were brutes. Their inhuman strength along with the power of numbers and spirit power allowed such a thing to be possible, but even if they were able to restrain the skeleton, that feat taxed their bodies. If the skeleton were to swat them away with its hands, their flimsy restraints would crumble.

     Having sensed this, the skeleton reached downwards, but it was then intercepted by multiple coated men wielding swords of light. They were melee fighters. They waited on the ground below and sprung into action only to parry the skeleton’s attacks whenever it came to destroy its restraints. Both brutes and fighters were accompanied with enhancers, protecting the brutes with barriers, sustaining their energy to continue their push, and also enhancing the weapons of the fighters, occasionally joining to parry attacks.

     The skeleton attempted to break through their defenses using brute force and brought down its fists into the ground. But waves of hunters intercepted them, spears, swords, axes, repeatedly attacked a single location on each arm until they were cut down and fell towards the ground. The cut-off skeletal hands were then shoved away by hunters with maces, staffs, and warhammers, successfully protecting the brutes.

     Only when its arms were cut that it realized it couldn’t last long. The attacks from the rear were now taking a toll on its skull. Since it ignored the rear’s attacks only to make a failed attempt of taking out the brutes below, its skull was fairly damaged, consisting of small cracks and occasional holes.

     It regenerated its arms, again and again, to try and break the restrains below it, only to fail in every attempt. Its skull was now heavily damaged, large holes and cracks spread on its surface. It wouldn’t take long before it finally broke. The image of the death of its ally flashed through its empty skull, a singular strike, shattering its skull into mere fragments. Fueled with despair, anger, and desire for revenge against the small vermin below, it roared a blood-curdling scream into the sky above it, causing the air around them to reverberate. Along with its scream arrived another wave of vile energy, raising the hairs of the hunters around them.

     The hunters quickly examined its body, searching for something different. Then, they spotted something appear in the middle of its ribcage. An orb emitting dark energy, ominous green and black air spiraled around it and extended through its body. It twisted around its arms, legs, ribcage, and even in and around the holes of its skull, creating a perfect anatomy of what would happen if a tentacle monster grew inside your body and decided to take it over. The ominous air hardened, turning into solid, tentacles wiggled around uncontrollably in its eye pockets and jaw as the skeleton screamed in pain. The gory scene before them caused some of the rear hunters to stop attacking and grimaced as they stared at it.

*“\*Ryosei, isn’t this…?\*”*

*“\*Yeah, it’s a rampaging spirit.\*”*

The sight boggled their minds. Although they already knew about a rampaging spirit, they’ve never seen of heard of a living being, turning into a rampaging spirit while they were still alive. Despite its skinless body, the skeleton was still technically alive as a species of a different world, but despite that, it still turned into a rampaging spirit, something that is only available to spirits. One thing is for a fact, the skeleton wasn’t a spirit before. A contradiction in their knowledge led them to conclude that the orb the skeleton took earlier was the cause of this transformation.

     The skeleton let out another loud roar and kicked up its feet, sending the brutes and everyone in the way of its swinging leg launching high up into the sky. With its increase in power and loss of restraints, it swung its arms and stopped its feet onto the rear, who were already trying to flee.

     “TEMPORARY RETREAT! REGROUP AT THE EAST BARRIER POINT AND REQUEST FOR SUPPORT ON A THREAT LEVEL A!”

     The order echoed throughout the forest as well as in Connect networks. The hunters responded accordingly and made their way east of the forest. This was a safe card to play. Seeing as their enemy was unlike anything they’ve ever seen before; they needed to measure its strength and gather data on what it was capable of before sending out units to take it down. However, the plan didn’t ring well in Senkyo’s ears. Although it was safe, it was clear that the enemy was only going to get stronger from here on. If the core in its ribcage formed fully and the tentacles covered its whole body like armor, it would be even harder to take down. They needed to strike now while the core was still visible. His raging emotions were clear to Ryosei, making him place his hand on Haruto’s shoulder and telling him,

     “There’s no need for that. We’ll take care of this.”

     Haruto’s eyes widened in surprise before he shouted at him for suggesting to fight the monster on his own.

     “What!? Look, kid, I don’t care if you’re the new wielder of the legendary blade. But takin’ that thin’ on when we don’t know what it's capable of, by yourself no less, is just suicide!”

     Haruto dropped his polite attitude as a result of hearing Ryosei’s words. Despite his protest, Ryosei simply shot him a grin before turning his back to him.

     “Orders say I’m on command now, remember? Although you handled your troops beautifully, I’ll be enough to take it on.”

     He left Haruto with those words before leaping down the tree branch and heading for the skeleton. Haruto clicked his tongue in frustration and reluctantly ordered the hunters to return on stand-by.

*“\*So, what’s the plan?\*”*

Ryosei asked Senkyo as he charged in.

*“\*We’re going to try something we couldn’t do in the battle royale.\*”*

*“\*You mean… Interchange?\*”*

*“\*You know it. But first, we’re going to need a few kunai.\*”*

*“\*What!? I just left Haruto though!\*”*

*“\*It’s not my fault you tried to act cool there! Go get some from a nearby hunter or something!\*”*

     Ryosei swallowed his pride and turned his head to the nearest hunter that seemed like they’d be carrying kunai. He changed his course and called out to the hunter atop a tree, who was wearing a black cloak, indicating they were an enhancer.

     “I’m going to need your kunai. Hand over some.”

     Perhaps because he was trying to hide his embarrassment, he ordered the hunter rather curtly. A surprised look appeared on the hunter’s face and stared blankly at him, trying to process the situation. When they took a once-over on Ryosei his eyes spotted Kuro Yaiba in their hands, helping him realize who the person in front of him was.

     “Come on, hurry up!”

     Ryosei’s restless voice brought them out of their daze and hurriedly took five kunai from his combat belt and handed them over to him. Having received the kunai, he stored them in his pockets and left for the skeleton.

*“\*Now, circle around the skeleton while chanting a spell. We’re going to cast Hell’s Pillar.\*”*

*“\*Isn’t that…\*”*

*“\*Yep, it’s the spell Hisho-chan taught Shiro. I don’t see a problem using something she gave us. It’s not like the spell will be unusable if she’s enemy or ally.\*”*

*“\*Guess so. Alright.\*”*

     Ryosei closed into the skeleton and began chanting. To activate the magic, he needed to plant five points of Hell’s Pillar in a circle. If the circle is distorted or if all the points weren’t planted, then the magic won’t activate. He didn’t need to make a perfect circle but at the very least something similar to one. He needed to make sure not to lose his bearings in order to succeed.

     “O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the first point of my retribution!”

     The skeleton spotted Ryosei beneath him and swung its hands downward, trying to grab him. It seemed like it was still trying to stick to its mission by catching Ryosei. But it was unknowingly making it easier for Ryosei to cast high-level magic to kill it.

     “O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the second point of my retribution!”

     While he was traversing the deformed land, broken trees and small crevices scattered around the skeleton served as additional obstacles along with the skeleton itself.

     “O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the third point of my retribution!”

     While his mind was processing everything around him almost instantly, a thought crossed his mind. If they cast Hell’s Pillar, would that really be enough to defeat the skeleton? Although the core was a different story, the skeleton was initially alive, so it may not need the core in order to live. If it became even more powerful, then it wouldn’t be strange if its bones did the same, allowing it to withstand the blast. He shot his question to Senkyo, casting and dodging all the while.

*“\*It’s as you say, there’s no certainty that Hell’s Pillar would be enough to destroy its skull. But that’s where we come in to finish the job. We’ll use Interchange to climb up its body all the way up to the skull where you’ll destroy it manually.\*”*

     Interchange. It was the official name Senkyo and Ryosei came up with to address their rapid control switching skill. While Ryosei was a master swordsman, he couldn’t enhance items and control their trajectory as Senkyo can. Combining the skills of two souls with one body at a single time, was Interchange.

*“\*The spear-thrower from earlier was creating spears using its body, and this one was able to hold up the lower half of its armor that you cut off using some of its bones, I assume. None of us could see how they did it since it was so dark. Even when you took control of my body, it always hid behind a tree so I couldn’t see it. We can’t be too careful. I’ll shoot out any bones coming our way when we climb this thing. We only have five kunai so you better get there quick.\*”*

*“\*Okay, I got it. Then that means we’ll be climbing while Hell’s Pillar is activated, right?\*”*

*“\*You got that right. Although it won’t destroy the bones, it will weaken them at the very least. I know Hisho-chan betrayed us, but you didn’t sense her lying when she said magic doesn’t hurt its user, did you?\*”*

Ryosei let out an inward sigh as everything Senkyo said made sense to him. Senkyo knew Ryosei had a tremendous amount of distrust against Yuu, which made him opposed to anything that originally came from her, but hearing Senkyo’s explanation made him cave in.

     “O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the fifth point of my retribution!”

     Having set the last point of Hell’s Pillar, Ryosei headed inside the circle, stopped directly under the skeleton, and began chanting its last lines. The moment he uttered the last word, everything around them will be set ablaze, so he needed to memorize as much of the skeleton in front of him as he could. Although he knew Senkyo can simply guide him with spirit vision, it would help if he remembered the general layout and his pathing.

     “With the five keys set, open the gates of hell and begin my reckoning! Hell's Pillar!”

     After the name of the spell left his mouth, the ground below him rumbled as strings of fire surged upwards starting from the center. The flame consumed Ryosei, the core, and ended at the jaw of the skeleton’s skull. Yuu and every one of the hunters watched the scene in front of them, their minds asking no one in particular whether or not Ryosei could accomplish this feat. But then, the string of fire that blasted out the center gradually disappeared. It only lasted for a second. Everyone was questioned what happed seeing as Hell’s Pillar didn’t even expand from the middle of the circle.

     Craning their necks downwards from the skeleton’s skull, their eyes widened, gasps heaved as they saw Ryosei standing still in the center, motionless. His clothes were tattered as it was seared with intense flame, ashes of the burnt areas of his clothes scattered over the ground, remnants of the great flame remained of his clothes, continuously burning the rest of his clothes. Yuu who was watching from above stared in utter confusion. His clothes shouldn’t have burnt since she remembered teaching him to wrap his clothes in mana whenever he planned on entering in his own magic. But a closer look and a change of angle made everything clear—no, it simply made everything even stranger. However, worry overpowered the confusion out of her head.

     Ryosei couldn’t support his own weight and dropped to his knees and fell on his bottom, remaining at a kneeling position. Under his singed clothes, was his skin charred, covered with severe burns. His normal, supple skin turned dry and leathery, large burn spots consisting of black, white, brown, and yellow. His hair was seared in the flame, leaving nothing but a large bald spot on his head.

     Everyone froze in shock, but then the first person quickly came to, realizing the opportunity they’d been given. The scarred skeleton, who was watching from the sidelines, sprung up to action. It transformed its bone sickle to a harpoon and threw it towards Ryosei. Its weapon was severed many times, but there was still enough range for it to reach Ryosei. The hunters quickly acted the moment they realized what was happening.

     Hands shuffling, weapons brandishing, voices chanting, footfalls dropping, every hunter moved to save Ryosei, and the next second, everyone was silenced. The noise dispersed and the natural ambiance of the forest returned. The panicked scrambling was reduced to simple stares. The blade of the jagged harpoon ended right in front of Ryosei’s shoulder. The blade was stopped, and Ryosei was saved, not by a spell nor a weapon, but with a body.

     Ryosei’s eyes widened. The sound of broken glass resounded in his ear. Locks of crimson hair fell to the ground as it separated from its owner. The ends of a skirt fluttered downwards from the quick speed they arrived at. Blue fabric covered most of his vision as he looked up, a blue jacket that was ripped in three places. Two of which sprouted bat wings which spread in a wide arc, covering more of his vision. The third cut was drenched with blood, from behind, it would be the area where the heart is, piercing through the area was a bony harpoon with several jagged blades to hold onto whatever it hit. He could hear the sounds of struggle coming from the person in front of him. A dam burst after hearing her muffled grunts.

     “G-Gah! Kghh…! H-Hisho-chan…!”

     The owner of the voice was no longer Ryosei. Senkyo forcefully took back control of his body in order to call out to the girl in front of him. Taking back control meant that the pain Ryosei was feeling would transfer to him. But surprisingly, there was much less pain than he initially thought, but he knew that meant his condition was worse.

     “D-Damn it! Gah, whatever! You saved me the trouble of going after you.”

     The scarred skeleton pulled on his spine-rope and brought Yuu towards it.

          With the last of her strength, Yuu turned her head behind her, making eye contact with Senkyo. She then managed to shoot him a tiny smile, blood exiting the crack of her lips. In a low voice, she left him a message before being pulled in by the skeleton, causing Senkyo to produce tears from his eyes. From the fire, it seemed like his face was the least damaged.

     The skeleton pulled out a white gem from its shawl, flickering like a broken lightbulb. It passed it through the air, creating a dimensional rift that led to the unknown. Then, it threw Yuu’s body like luggage into the rift, disappearing from the world. The rift then slowly closed, the white gem abruptly broke as it did, and the skeleton’s attention shifted to Senkyo.

     The hunters knew it was time to move, they charged in again to save Senkyo, but they were stopped in their tracks by the giant skeleton above them. It swung its arms and kicked its legs, keeping the hunters away and blocking the attacks coming for its ally.

     “N-No…”

     Senkyo spoke inadvertently. Although, not for the reasons most people were expecting.

*“\*S-Senkyo!? Hey! Can you hear me!?\*”*

     Ryosei called out to Senkyo, trying to get a hold of his attention. In this situation, anyone should be feeling fear, terror, panic, despair, or anything of the like as they are about to be taken in by a skeleton from another world, but not Senkyo. Instead of fear, Senkyo’s emotions burned with rage, so much that even Ryosei was being affected by it. He didn’t know what Senkyo could do in his state, deep inside, he hoped it was all just malice with nothing to back it up, but for some reason, it didn’t feel like that was the case. The fact that Ryosei didn’t know what was happening in Senkyo’s mind brought him fear.

     Senkyo forcefully moved his arms, both hands gripping on Kuro Yaiba; one on the hilt, and one at the base of the blade, creating a hand-scabbard. After seeing this, it was all too obvious to Ryosei what he was planning.

*“\*STOP! SENKYO! DON’T DO THIS! YOU DON’T NEED TO! SHIRO AND I WILL PROTECT YOU! SHE ALREADY HAS A STRONG BARRIER UP! JUST CALM DOWN!\*”*

     Ryosei screamed at Senkyo. A memory flashed through his mind. The memory that held the reason why their secret family house in the mountains was reduced to that state. The day after his parents died, he went to the house, only for a monster to find its way inside. Filled with rage and nothing to pour onto, he uttered a single sentence that brought the house to its current state and completely obliterated the monster. What was most shocking was the time that took him to do so, a grand total of one second.

     With no signs of stopping, Ryosei tried to forcibly take control, but Senkyo wasn’t letting him. Since he was the owner of the body, it was only natural he had superior control. Then, Ryosei attempted to leave his body and manifest to stop him directly, to his surprise, he wasn’t able to do so. When he thought of Senkyo having superior control, he didn’t expect him to be able to trap him inside his body. With no other cards to play, Ryosei contacted Haruto through Connect.

*“\*HARUTO! ORDER EVERYONE TO RETREAT! GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE YOU DIE!\*”*

     Ryosei sounded absurd to him. The person who said they would be able to handle the situation by themselves was unmoving in the middle of the fray, only seconds away from being kidnapped.

*“\*STOP JOKING—\*”*

*“\*SHUT UUUP! YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND! I NEED YOU TO LEAVE BEFORE—\*”*

     “Unbind the manacles of my zenith.”

     While Ryosei was in the middle of ordering the other hunters to retreat, Senkyo uttered a single sentence, seething with pure rage. He was too late.

     Senkyo drew Kuro Yaiba from his hand-scabbard, grasping it tightly in order to make a shallow cut through his fingers. The backside of his hand dripped blood while the other released a thick miasma as he drew his sword, concealing the blade as he drew it.

*“\*GET OUT OF HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEERE!!!\*”*

     Ryosei roared at Haruto through connect, making a last attempt to save his allies. The panic in his voice rang alarm bells in Haruto, causing him to call a retreat. He didn’t quite understand what was happening, so he decided to watch from afar. The miasma spread through the area, shrouding Senkyo in its cloud.

     “No, you don’t!”

     The scarred skeleton threw its harpoon into the cloud where Senkyo once kneeled, aiming for his shoulder. As the blade disappeared in the miasma, it felt a tug in its spine-rope. Thinking it caught him, it pulled it back, only to find out that his spine-rope had been severed.

     From within the smoke, a thunderous blast assaulted the ears of those that remained and the miasma spread across the land, consuming the two skeletons and Haruto. When Haruto felt it was safe to open his eyes, he was greeted by a furious rumbling, the ground beneath the trees cracking.

     He took a quick glance at the location Senkyo last stood and was dumbfounded by what he’d seen. The person who he assumed to be Senkyo donned caliginous armor, dark, shadowy plates garnished with brilliant gold that twinkled in the night. His back was covered by a nebulous cape as if the mist was constantly shaping it. His visor glowed deep blue, tracing the pupils of his eyes like a flame.

     His grand, imposing armor wasn’t the only thing to behold. His armored gauntlets clasped the hilt to a beclouded blade resting on his shoulder plates. The dark rayless blade stretched half a meter with the guard swiveling around the blade, but that was only the blade. In addition to the blade, a dark, misty cloud wrapped the blade’s edges, expanding over three times its length.

     Haruto couldn’t get rid of the terror he was giving off. He was the epitome of death. Grand and deadly. Now he understood why Ryosei wanted everyone away from this, realizing that, it was his time to go as well, but as fate would have it, it wasn’t going to be easy.

     The crevices on the ground below expanded into fissures. The gaping hole of darkness inside it was the last place he wanted to be. He jumped from tree to tree to avoid the ground, but then the life drained from them, turning their healthy bark to grey twigs. He quickly hopped off to the solid ground. He had no choice but to hop over the pitfalls of doom, but when he raised his head there was barely any land left, in fact, the land he was standing on was floating over the pits of hell.

     His face chilled as a horrifying sight was brought to his face. The whole world was falling apart around him. He closed his eyes in fear, bracing for his impending doom, but that never came. When he reopened his eyes, he was brought back to the dark forest. Everything around him seemed fine. He looked around in confusion for a while before he was reminded of the person who brought his nightmares to life.

     He rushed back to the battlefield, but when he got there, there was no trace of Senkyo or the skeletons. There were no fissures but crevices from the giant skeleton’s attacks were still present. After experiencing the roller coaster of life and death, he was brought to his knees, his brain overheating from all the confusion he accumulated. He stared at the sky as if asking it a question, a lifeless voice echoing out his throat.

     “How the hell am I supposed to report this…?”

**…………**

     A few minutes earlier, Senkyo was faced with the two skeletons. Sensing the terrifying aura he released, the giant skeleton decided to kill him instead of catching him. It brought its foot down to stomp on him but it was quickly sliced off with his gigantic sword. The skeleton tried to regenerate its leg back, but it didn’t work, making it lose balance and fall to the ground.

     Senkyo turned to the skeleton, malice in his eyes. With swift movements he cut every limb off its body separating its upper and lower arms, upper and lower legs, leaving only the skull and the ribcage attached. The giant skeleton screamed in pain while the other simply watched in horror. The giant skeleton attempted to regenerate, but an unknown force was preventing him.

     “Serves you right.”

     If Senkyo’s eyes could be seen, it would be looking down on the giant skeleton like it was worthless trash. With the snap of his finger, the ground broke apart and created fissures, consuming the broken limbs of the skeleton into its shadowy darkness.

     He turned to the scarred skeleton, the one who killed Yuu with a pierce through the heart. The flames in his visor went ablaze as the memory crossed his mind. He put his hand to the rest of the giant skeleton’s body as he stared at the scarred skeleton.

     “Rot.”

     The trees around them were sucked out of their lives, turning into nothing but tall grey twigs. To his side, not only were the trees withering but so were the bones of the skeleton. Its thick, heavy bones turned to nothing but ashes and were taken by the wind.

     Anger welled up in the scarred skeleton, but above that was fear. It knew it needed to escape. It turned around in an attempt to run away, but the dreadful sound of a finger snapping behind it brought trepidation, a chill running down its spine. Not a moment later, the skeleton’s fears came true and the land around them broke to pieces and fell into the dark abyss below, leaving nothing but a straight path from Senkyo to the skeleton.

     The skeleton’s bones shivered, the embodiment of death nearing him one terrifying footstep at a time. Then, its face lightened up as it remembered something. It searched its shawl in a panic, looking through its pockets. It then found an opaque gem and ripped apart the air in front of it, creating a rift through worlds. It jumped in without hesitation, disappearing from the world.

     However, Senkyo wasn’t about to let its prey escape him. With a blinding speed, he rushed into the rift, leaving a shadowy trail and chasing after the skeleton. He preemptively swung his sword horizontally, cutting everything in its path. The next thing he knew, the swing had cut the skeleton’s skull into two, putting the fire out of its life.

     Then, Senkyo’s armor and sword began dissipating into the air, revealing his scorched body and charred uniform. He took a few deep breaths, not because he was tired, but to try and calm himself down. He silently walked up to the skeleton to inspect its belongings, but then, the stone wall beside him distorted and several spikes of stone pierced through his body, sending it to the opposite wall and suspending him in the air, blood running down each spike.

     He could hear the distant voices of his friends, Ryosei and Shiro, calling out his name. Unfortunately, the call of darkness was much stronger, his eyes closing allowing less and less light through his vision, the darkness consuming him. It didn’t take long for the voices of his friends to die down into silence and lose his consciousness.

     Yet, beyond the wall of darkness, there was a single voice that resonated in Senkyo’s ears more than anything. It was the voice of the vampire girl one year below him that usually wore a bright smile that did wonders to his mood, the person who betrayed him and planned to bring him to Zerid, the first person to ever ensnare his heart, and the person who died using their body to save his life, Hisho Yuu. Her last words echoed in Senkyo’s unconscious mind.

     “I’m sorry.”

     With the image of her dying face in his mind, Senkyo fell into a deep sleep.