**Prologue: Endeavor in the Shadows**

“Haa… They didn’t come out again…”

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

Her cup of was refilled multiple times in the time that she did her homework. But doing homework or eating their food was not the real reason she was spending her time there. The real reason she was there was nowhere to be found.

“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 night time 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. But 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 has never seen Yuu leave with them. After that, Senkyo and Itsuki just went back to their homes looking tired without doing anything. Which caused Yukai to be 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 kept losing them every single time. It was like something was preventing her from following them.

After that week, Senkyo end the others stared going to both the mountains and the restaurant but every time Yukai always ended up with the same results… Losing them. 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 where 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 the manager is getting mad at me. I have to go back to my old schedule.”

With her depressed look, she stood up and took her bag and headed to the toilet before she went home. She exited the cubicle and was headed to wash her hands but 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 behind her. 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 saw 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 (昭 恋), age: 16, 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 assuming things! 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 her 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 today.

“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, Ren tried her best to brush Yukai off but she was unsuccessful. Yukai was insistent and didn’t let Ren 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 by skirt lifting up.”

“Oh… 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 IN 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, there are 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.

Yukai and Ren 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. For some reason, when Yukai and Ren got closer to the bridge, Ren stopped talking and her face turned serious. Confused of 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 came 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! Wh-why is there a kappa here?!”

Yukai screamed in a panicked voice. Kappas blocked both ends of the bridge and even appeared from 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 Yukai and Ren, 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 on the ground. Nothing bled out from it, but the way its severed head stared at her was beyond creepy. It’s head and body soon dissipated into ashes. Yukai jolted back of terror from the disgusting sight in front of her, which caused another kappa do leap at her from behind. But much like the other kappa, it was beheaded before it ever reached Yukai. The reason for that was because of 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 at them. They planned to overwhelm Ren with numbers. Despite the multitude of enemies attacking her from all sides, fear did no show in Ren’s face. She stayed calm and readied her weapon. With her spear rested on her right arm, the first kappa reached her attack range, the massacre began.

A green broken piece of a gem that was attached where the blade of the spear and the pole connected glowed as Ren made a circular slash. The slash cut down the kappas that were within the spear’s arc and left a flurry of wind that cut down everything that touched it, making minced kappa out of the kappas that touched it. With Ren and Yukai wrapped within the veil of razor-sharp wind, they were protected from the mob of kappas.

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 in the enemy’s numbers and as well as their morale. Horrified to meet the same fate as the rest of their 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 quick as possible. Although she could wait things out while slowly cutting down their numbers, she was worried about Yukai. As far as she knew, Yukai 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 as quick as possible, so she acted as fast as she could.

Ren placed her spear close to her hip. With the intention to attack, the green gem glowed once more. She took a large step forward and thrusted 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 limit 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 thrusted 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.

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 was met by long-ranged slashes. With trained movements, Ren stayed close to Yukai while thrusting and slashing her spear on her enemies. 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.

Spirits like yokai do not leave corpses behind but 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!\*”* Yukai 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 on 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 about her newfound friend, Ren was still left confused as to why Yukai 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 in the center of the kappa’s mouth.

But before she could thrust her spear, a dark figure came 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 from hitting them. The kappa was blown away to the side and was cut in another half. Ren looked at the kappa for confirmation, and sure enough it was cut twice. One horizontal cut and one vertical. The question was, who or what caused that?

Ren faced the dark figure which was responsible for the first cut and readied her spear. 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 was sliced in four 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. The dark figure was then covered in a blue flame and was nowhere to be seen.

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

Ren warned Yukai 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 blue 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 of 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 to somewhere. He was inside Freda’s 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 brought Senkyo through a door that led 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 holes 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 so as she brought her face closer to Senkyo.

“W-Well, not in particular. But I am curious about what other things exists 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 dragged further down the stairs towards an 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 surroundings, he could see a wall of stone with a waterfall pouring down into a river that led to a lake. There was no such indication that they were underground.

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 Senkyo, but their beauty was undeniable.

Be that as it may, those were not the most surprising thing 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 Senkyo-san, Konjou Ryosei-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 in 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 besides 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 tense air 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 put his guard down at Freda’s words. After that small misunderstanding was cleared up, Freda 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 to it “Hello!” The leaf then began to repeat “Hello!” over and over again with Senkyo’s voice and with the same volume.

“Whoa, its 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 disguises itself as that surface and hides anything behind it. When a whole branch in planted, the branch and the leaves on it becomes disguised.

“Amazing. This would be perfect for hiding.”

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

The next plant were 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 color from blue and purple. It also becomes resistant to fire.

“I wish I could show you how 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 around 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 Senkyo-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 Senkyo’s 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 playing 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 is it has to 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 play 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 as 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 chants. If you were to take away the mana from any magic, it would become nothing. Which means that Shiro has a natural magical barrier that protects her from any magical attack.

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 Senkyo 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 a field circle 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 did a short jump and suddenly disappeared into thin air.

“Ah, there she goes. Sorry about that, Freda-san. Shiro seems to only trusts 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 is 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 of the events in the Konjou Clan in the past 6 years, as well as its 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 which only a handful of people knew existed.

They explored the Spirit Realm in hopes of understanding it better. After a lot of hardship, they finally figured out how the Spirit Realm 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 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 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 hearts of humans. If all cores of a spirit are broken, they will die. They are unable to use mana and use 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. Spirited souls are the souls of beings that died in Earth or Zerid. Souls of the dead are usually reincarnated immediately, but there are also times where their soul unconsciously refuses to reincarnate due to a 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 their memories and become 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 it 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 where 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. They are reached depending on the amount of spirit power a spirit possesses. From lowest to highest status, there exists ghosts, eidolons, revenant, spirit, seer, visitant, guardian, sentinel, demigod, and god. These represent the current power a spirit has and what they are capable of. Each status enables you a different ability.

Ghost. Is the lowest status and only have the base abilities of manifesting 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 are only available to them.

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

Revenant. It gives the spirited soul the ability to manifest their form in the living worlds. Unlike visiting, it fully manifests an identical copy of what they looked like from when they were alive and has a great increase in its limitations ranging to 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 in 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 themselves in all three worlds. Spirits of seer status or lower are only able to manifest their spiritual body in one or two worlds.

Guardian. The spirit receives the ability to guard a living being. This status is defined by humans as a guardian angel. By becoming someone’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 themselves.

Sentinel. It blesses the spirit with the same effects of the previous Spirit status, but in a greater scale. Furthermore, it 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.

Demigod. It grants the spirit with 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 on that force. An example of this is a to-be god of sea can control water in some way.

God. So far there are no known spirits that have successfully become a god. Resulting in 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, acquire 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 spirit’s spirit power; physical attacks do not work. In making contact with another spirit, they will not take damage unless the spirit they touch have an intent to kill. 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 are able to make contact with physical objects. It was found out in the expeditions that rampaging spirits can be reverted to their normal selves if they are calmed down. If left alone, they will continue to be in that state and can become permanent.

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

Yousuke just finished explaining everything to Senkyo and Ryosei.

“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. The reason why END uses spirit lanterns is 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? Does that mean spirit zones differ from soul to soul?”

“…We do not know. Spirits zones of a soul can range from a day all the way 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.”

“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.”

“I see. That would be all.”

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

“Huh?”

Senkyo paused for a moment and tried to recall from his memories, but he couldn’t remember anything that Yousuke said. Just as he was about to say that, 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 ask, but can you not ask about that?”

Yousuke sharpened his gaze on Ryosei. He returned the gesture with a serious face. They 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 to 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, its private. But if you share your powers with us, we can be able to think of ways to utilize it! This could save many hunters in battles and could give us a change to finally take on 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 blankly staring at Ryosei. But he quickly calmed himself down and recollected himself. After a long sigh, he gave his response.

“Theorized information, huh… 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.”

“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?\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

Senkyo and Ryosei were having a private conversation in their heads. They were reminded of the events that happened yesterday. Seeing as Senkyo didn’t want to continue the conversation, they resumed their focus to 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 can I ask that Shiro-san and Konjou Ryosei-san to leave your body?”

“Eh? I-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 offered him to take a visit to 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 catch her attention by visiting her if his rank was below a revenant. 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, could we proceed?”

“That choice will completely rely on you.”

“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 Senkyo-kun, what I am about to tell you will change your life forever. I have not told anyone about this ever since I arrived here, except for the chief, Dai-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. This will constantly be on your mind, haunting you like a living ghost. It will forever affect your decisions and possibly your personality. You will never be able to return to a peaceful life. Now, I want you to choose. Do you want me to proceed?”

*\*She has mistaken something. What she was telling me was 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 was 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 to 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 decision. 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 cause me to make the worst decision possible… along with tremendous pain in the future.\**

**…………**

Ryosei was sent to the spirit realm. Senkyo and Freda were gone and everything around him changed. The time of day turned to night and small particles floated around him. He was by 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. 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.

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 using spirit power as a hunter. 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 a 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 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 on the palm of his hand, Ryosei used his spirit power on it. The pearl then expanded and transformed to 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 spirit. 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 presences 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. Normally there are a lot more.”

Ryosei thought it was strange but he put it on 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 night time 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.

Like how Ryosei thought it was pointless to think hard about whether something gave out light or not, he thought it was pointless to know how Senkyo obtained a divine soul. Divine souls are received form someone’s birth, so it was natural to not think too much about its origin. But if that were really the case, they 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 that he did not know the answer to. Despite having all of Senkyo’s memories from birth, Senkyo was still a mystery to him. That just goes to show how much Senkyo was being kept in the dark. By both his father and Shiro.

“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… an it’s—”

Before Ryosei could even finish his thought, black feathers came flying towards him from within the trees. Ryosei swiftly dodges it and runs behind a tree for cover. The feathers stuck to the ground where he previously was. Whatever those feathers were, they were powerful enough to pierce the ground.

Just before he hid, he took a glance at the source of the feathers but only saw 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 to 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 Ryosei was behind a tree, whoever was attacking intentionally positioned themselves behind him. Ryosei had a bad feeling about it and ducked. Not a second later, a blade cut though 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 to Kuro Yaiba as he completed his swing. But the shadow was too fast and disappeared back into the trees. He covered his escape by launching sharp feathers at Ryosei, but he was able to successfully deflect all of them. He wasn’t about to let the shadow 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 behind him and flapped them downwards sending it upwards in high speeds. Ryosei followed by using flash strike 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 behind his back. It wore traditional clothing and was holding a katana on his right hand. He recognized it was a yokai from Japanese mythology that were 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’s sky. It expanded its wings and propelled himself backwards while sending out feather blades. Ryosei wasn’t able to deflect them fast enough due to the close distance and got hit. While falling out of the sky, he pointed his blade to the exact opposite direction of the tengu.

“Magic arts: Crackling Thunder!”

“KA!?”

The tengu who thought Ryosei was about to fall off the sky, was severed in half when a burst of lightning appeared behind his enemy and sliced through him with it. Having separated from its lower body, it fell limply to the ground. It flapped its wings to break its fall, just before reaching the 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 with 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’s clothes and threw him next to a tree. With the pearl on his hand, he transformed them into ropes and tied 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…”

“KA!!”

The tengu felt a sharp pain going 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 his head. Ryosei was using how spirit power works to his advantage. If he doesn’t intend to kill it, then it won’t get hurt or lose spirit power. But if he does, then that pain will immediately run through its 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. Which was why Ryosei was using all the time he had until it completely regenerated.

“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?”

“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 and hearing.

“K-K-K-KAA!!”

“Answer the question.”

Ryosei enabled the rope to hurt him for a few seconds. It tried to dodge his question.

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

“A ball of light…”

The tengu was talking about the Konjou clan’s barrier. Ryosei thought it was simple curiosity that made the tengu target him.

“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 to his actions. To it, Ryosei just 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.”

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

“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 out if you can perform the new skills in every status.”

“That’s annoying… Well then, why are you the only spirit around here. Normally there are others.”

“Ka. 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 came 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 for 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?”

“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.”

“Now why would I do that?”

“Ka! You need a guide to this world, don’t you? If you manage to take 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 in 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?”

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

“…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 the ground and began walking around town.

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

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

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

“Ok, then I’ll be going.”

“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 affect 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 that squinted horizontally. Its body was fully 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 was an eidolon.

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 in the future.”

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 aimed directly at Ryosei but was met with the empty air behind him. Ryosei used flash strike to escape and stabbed the lizard’s side with his dagger, but its scales deflected the attack.

Ryosei landed safely on the ground and made some distance between them. The lizard faced Ryosei 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 went into 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 store, 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 scales 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. 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 with Ryosei nowhere to be seen.

“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 his status and spirit power. He was still on 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 went down further 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 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. He reached the base of its tongue and cut it off.

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 its own spikes and destroying each other. 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 saw Ryosei standing in front of it. Enraged, the lizard began screeching. Ryosei released his weapon and covered his ears. 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.

With the lizard’s spikes destroyed and its tongue pierced with holes, the lizard was an open target. Ryosei noticed that the lizard returned to its normal size. But upon closer inspection, it was actually smaller.

“Heh, this is checkmate.”

Sensing its 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.

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 vertical 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 revered 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. Which was why it was easy for Ryosei to spot a transparent orb in the middle of solid color.

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

“Haahh… That was harder than I thought. Moving around too much 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 to 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.

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 of 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 actually 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 it could barely be noticed.

“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. Normally, destruction like this will be regenerated in a few hours. But looking at this, this 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 do not know how it works. It seems to have affected the landscape but not my body.”

Shin put his hand above his stomach. He remembered the fear he had the moment he realized he was struck with magic. The severed part of his upper body but it didn’t burn like the landscape did.

“I guess he is what the old geezers were talking about. To think he was actually real… 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 the magic from the other worlds. He really 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 forest.

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 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 battle.

“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 really is different when it comes to spirits. Why can’t there just be an HUD like in Senkyo’s MMOs to make things easier? Haaa…”

Ryosei pushed back all the stress to the back of his head, stretched his back, and closed his eyes. When Ryosei opened his eyes, there was 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 reappear. He can control its appearance by simply willing for it to appear. 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 up high in the sky. It seems that not seeing what 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. 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 dispersing 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 and headed 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 on his tracks.

“Eh? What did it…?”

The kappa disappeared in a weird 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 guy 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, Yukai being in another mess or the mysterious spear user who he never heard of. 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.”

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 at high speed.

Ryosei immediately used glimpse to try and 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.

And right after he did so, his surroundings were completely different. There were no particles and it was actually nighttime. He was back on earth. But Ryosei had no time to be amazed, in just a few seconds the kappa will reach them.

Ryosei took his stance, but realized he was a distorted shadow. He couldn’t physically see his body in detail, but that didn’t matter. Ryosei 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. He blinked his eyes and summoned the circle for his spirit power and saw the numbers still appeared 12974/13000. Last time, he had to wait until he absorbed the core.

“Maybe I can 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 headed straight towards 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 looked at 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.”

Ryosei and Yukai were having their idle chat but the situation still didn’t sit right with Ren. She came 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?”

“Actually, there is.”

Ren pointed her spear at Ryosei. Her eyes were filled with distrust.

“That wouldn’t be possible. All spirited souls lose their memories. What do you have to say about that?”

“…”

Ryosei made a mistake. Who he was talking to wasn’t affiliated with the clan. A stranger that also knew about the spirit realm. It was possible she was a member of another group. It would be bad if she discovered that he 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 look in his eyes.

“Ah, y-yeah! Actually, 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.

“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 looked at 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. It seemed to trouble Ren. She reluctantly lowered her spear stored it back in her bag.

“Alright, fine. Then I’ll be on my way.”

Ren was about to leave, but she was immediately stopped.

“Ah, I was hoping I could still walk with you to your home. Sorry, am I being too much of a bother?”

Ren was surprised with what Yukai said, but she didn’t seem to mind.

“If he doesn’t do anything weird, I’m fine with it.”

“Did you hear that, Ryosei-onii-san? Come on, let’s go!”

“O-Okay?”

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 to her earlier cheerfulness. It was like night and day. One second she was cheerful and sad the next. Ryosei couldn’t 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 would’ve definitely wouldn’t notice.”

Yukai stayed quiet and lowered her head. That wasn’t how she usually acted. She would’ve answered Ryosei the second he asked. Ryosei tried to peek under her face and look at 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 in a flash and tried to deny his claim but seeing Ryosei’s serious look, she swallowed her words.

“Hahh… Looks like saving people have their own consequences.”

Ryosei saved Yukai when she was little and died for it. He made an act of kindness to Yukai and denied her any 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. 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 came out 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 into 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 really ended up doing was 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 to butt in.

The tears came pouring down Yukai’s eyes. Her cries filled the dark, empty streets. She arrived to a quiet, two-story apartment. She climbed the stairs and stopped in front of room 203. 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. 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 and 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 whole heartedly but Yukai cut him off before he could finish and reburied her face in her arms. Ryosei 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 in 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 didn’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 me 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 Yukai. 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. Us humans don’t want to be hurt. None of us do. We act selfish 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 selfish and troubled everyone. I ran away like 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 I messed up. 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 he 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 telling her.

“I didn’t forgive myself.”

“Th-Then…!”

Yukai tried to interrupt, but Ryosei didn’t let 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 on to 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 at 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. Ryosei 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 hugged her back with the other. He enveloped her in his soothing warmth and stayed like that for a while longer.

**Chapter 2: Mutuality**

It was the next day. The morning sun was illuminating the classrooms of hardworking students. Senkyo was one of them. Unlike past days, he was completely focused on the ongoing class. Yesterday was his talk with Freda, but it was also the day he was introduced to his new mentor. He was so tired that he fell asleep the moment he got to his bed. He was filled with energy from his long sleep.

While he was focused on his class, Ryosei had his own worries. When he returned to Senkyo yesterday and entered his body, they both shared each other’s memories.

**…………**

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

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

“Hahh… 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. Senkyo wanted to change the atmosphere 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 at the end, he wasn’t able to make contact with a single one.

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

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

**…………**

\**“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 was filling 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 see her. This was the first time he saw anyone like this.

It took him a few seconds to get back 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 the spirit realm to do anything.

\**“Hey, Senkyo. Open up a 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. He hovered his hand above the circle and a blue flame appeared from his palm and placed itself on 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, 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, going to the spirit realm is more dangerous than I thought. I better be careful the next time I come here. Anyway…”

Ryosei moved on and transferred his focus to Yukai’s seat. There was something unusual hovering above it. It was a red flame. 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, it was replaced with 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 unsuccessful. His hand didn’t make contact with her at all. 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 wasn’t 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 at 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 anything 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. Ryosei explored the whole school and even the locations around it, but he didn’t find a single thing.

“Hahh… I’m stumped.”

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

“I guess this means that nothing is influencing her. But I can’t be too sure. Hahh… If only I could talk with her right now. Then, maybe I could get somewhere.”

Ryosei’s eyes naturally gravitated towards the red flame below him. 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.”

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 roof top 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.

“…”

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 her left side. The flame stopped for a few seconds, but then, it moved closer to Ryosei. In his glimpse, Yukai was peeking round the building’s 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. When he did, he saw the clear blue sky above him, the town over at 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!? W-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?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you see…”

Yukai explained how she ended up there. She went on to eat lunch when class ended. She apparently had trouble deciding about what to do after school. And when she finally decided, 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 through the celling like the moon, she knew something was wrong.

No once else could see it except her. She began thinking, and the only thing that came up to her head was Ryosei. Because of that, she followed the flame and got closer to it. And that’s how 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?”

“No, I don’t think so…”

“Then what was it?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out…”

Ryosei paused for a second before continuing.

“Your class is about to begin, right?”

“Yeah, 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 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. He didn’t ask what was wrong and waited for her to talk. After gathering the courage to talk, Yukai opened her mouth.

“Actually, about what I decided to do earlier… Before going to my part time job, I wanted to ask you to come with me.”

“Where to?”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“I already told you yesterday before, right? Isn’t that why you were looking for me?”

Yukai showed her appreciation by hugging Ryosei even tighter. It hurt him a bit but he toughed it out.

“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. 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 after that or she only saw my flame when she began thinking about me. All of this began since yesterday. I 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 a bit concerned for Yukai. She spent over five minutes standing still in silence, trying to gather her courage to enter. She didn’t respond. It seemed like she didn’t even notice him speak.

Instead of calling out for her, Ryosei tightened her grip on Yukai’s hand. 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 didn’t speak, but she walked forward. After dealing with the receptionist, they finally reached the door to a certain room. The patient of the room was Yutei Yuriko (勇低 由利子).

She reached to open the door and placed 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 and purple eyes. The same as Yukai. Her body seemed to have thinned out due to the tolls of time. It was an indication on how long she’s been here.

She 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 be 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 on my studies. I even got a part-time job. I didn’t want to rely on Dad’s money for any longer. I know you didn’t like doing that. Nothing much changed in half a year. I’m sorry I’m not much of a conversation since then. 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 were saying the exact opposite.

“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 broke. She couldn’t contain her emotions and her face was disheveled. She then groveled on the floor.

“*\*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 *\*hic\** I’m sorry!! *\*hic\** I’m really sorry!!!”

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. First, he thought of getting her off the ground. But when he carried 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. They stayed in the room 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, mother. 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 this past 6 months. She came in earnest and overcame herself. I would like it to find it in your heart to forgive her, if it ever troubled you. Thank you very much.”

Ryosei bowed to Yukai’s mother and proceeded 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 ward 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.” She apparently got a part time job here 6 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 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 on 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 in almost every word. But now she was completely composed.

After a while, Ryosei decided to walk inside and become a customer. He was about to push the door open, but 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. 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 couldn’t move since there were no holes for his weapon to go to. He had to protect his core at all cost. 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 bended 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 assassinate him. He didn’t 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 through those doors and freak 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. I don’t care how much you like it there on the living world, but if you can’t even keep basic things like that, you’re better off staying here.”

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

“Hm?”

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

“You’re at least at a revenant status, but you don’t know about this café? Just how did you manage to survive it here 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 this place. 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 making contact with his sword. He released it to reassure him of their safety. The soldier nodded his head.

“Okay. Cinnamon (シナモン).”

The barrier around Ryosei began to distort. It shrunk around him in a way that he couldn’t escape, but also transform into a tight collar around his neck.

“If you try anything, your head will be cut off and I’ll finish you off.”

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

“Ow!”

“Keep your hands to yourself. Now, Kris (クリス)!”

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 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 to his core. He led him to the building nearby where there were many spirited souls 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 bare the boredom.

“…”

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 customers of all kinds with respect and a big menu to choose from! The café that will soothe your soul, 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! 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 spirits 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, I’ll be nice ang give you a whole lecture of 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 spirit 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.”

“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 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 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 to now, I don’t think newcomers like you will have a hard time surviving.”

The boy seemed like he was thinking back to a past memory. His face turned from 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 him. 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 opposite to Ryosei.

“I-I’m sorry, Boss!”

“I told you Miss Kaitlyn (ケイトリン) was 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 him.

“Yes. He was about to enter the café without knowing how to act like a human. Luckily, there were 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 were only new here. But the fact that you’re at least a revenant status with experience in combat is highly suspicious. This isn’t the first time we’ve had spirits pretend to be newcomers here, after all.”

“I’m not looking for trouble. I didn’t even know businesses in this world existed. I mostly spent my time haunting the same building and fighting spirits that attacked me. This was 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 of 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.

“Hmm…”

Kaitlyn seemed to be thinking of something. If anything, she was looking for holes in Ryosei’s story. She sat there for a few seconds before reaching a decision.

“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 turned 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, the 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 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 is 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 yourself with one goal while the rest of us here with 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 its 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 at the middle of the street in front of the building they left from.

“We’re here. Cinnamon.”

The collar around Ryosei’s neck disappeared. 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 at 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, he 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. It was empty. Immediately, he 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!”

“Whoa!?”

Ryosei jumped in surprise and flicked his head in 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. Hearing her brought him back to his senses. 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 to 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 Ryosei’s strenuous face and decided to keep quiet until he talked. Upon entering her apartment, Ryosei used his glimpse to scan 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 that only appears when we’re thinking of the other person. If you stop thinking about me and the blue flame disappears that that will prove my theory.”

Yukai paled when she mistook Ryosei’s intentions but immediately brightened up and prepared to help him.

“O-Oh, got it. Sorry for misunderstanding. I’ll try 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 beat up about it.”

Was a depressed Yukai and Ryosei consoling her from behind. The two moved from talking in the entrance to the living room. They were sitting in front of a coffee table with tea readied 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. Not anyone can forcibly order for me. 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 did stop 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’s always been. But just before he made contact, Yukai let out a weak yet firm 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 kid! I get that you were trying to cheer me on, but petting my head is banned!”

She glared angrily at Ryosei. She was upset. 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 with his hand shaped into a fist.

“Got it. Then, how about this?”

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

“It’s a fist bump. Have you heard of it?”

Her eyes immediately brightened when he heard what Ryosei said. She shaped her hand into a fist and placed it in front of Ryosei’s fist. She turned to Ryosei trying to confirm she was doing it correctly and he responded with a light nod. She gingerly drew her fist closer to Ryosei’s, and applied a bit more force to her hand right before she 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 being 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 radiating from her. It was pitch black, the epitome of death. It conjured a foul presence that 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 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. It must be what 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 didn’t react to it like this. In fact, even everyone around him that wasn’t a spirit was able to see it.

*“\*No… I’m wrong. What we were seeing at that time was the result 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 their human. I can’t risk myself here.\*”*

He used glimpse and looked 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 shipping and imagination limited to anime, Senkyo. It’ll get real 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, although 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 before 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: Right and Wrong (Temp)**

The usual greenery and natural beauty of the forest was altered at night, coating the atmosphere with and eerie sensation. The only sounds that could be heard was the cold, chilling breeze blowing through the air, the cumulated sounds of nightly creatures, footsteps crushing the grass beneath them, and 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 Itsuki Watanabe walking by his lonesome at the dead of night, constantly complaining as he walked through the woods. He was wearing a black Gi, the battle uniform of brutes of the Konjou Clan, 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 probably planned 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. School was over, and Itsuki was off to meet his new mentor. 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 mountain.

Upon arriving downstairs, he was met with a long hallway with doors extending to different rooms to the sides and a huge double iron doors at the very end. Itsuki didn’t hesitate and walked forward to the very end of the hallway and tried to open the door. 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 unanswered. While he was trying to break down the door, a kunai was hurled behind his back.

“…Ha?”

Despite the sudden attack, Itsuki was able to grab 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 counterattack, but he was still enraged.

He turned his around with bloodshot eyes. Peeking over his shoulder, he saw and 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, anger in his eyes all the while producing 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 immediately 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 reached the old man and used his empowered punch and aimed for his head. The old man moved slightly, leaning to the side without even moving his legs. The pressure from his punch grazed the old man, indicated by the noticeable sparks on his barrier. He was a brute.

With his fist dodged, he kicked with his knee and thrusted 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. Itsuki crashed behind him and destroyed some of the stairs. Contrary to the old man’s expectations, he 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 pointed 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 threw another punch at him. The old man threw his arm up and parried Itsuki followed by a punch from his other fist. Itsuki and the old man engaged in a series of punching, kicking, and blocking back and forth some penetrating their defenses only to be stopped by their barriers.

“Enough.”

The old man uttered before blocking Itsuki’s next punch. The moment his fist made contact with the old man’s arm, he stopped moving. It was uncharacteristic of him to listen to someone so readily, especially since that very someone was the person who almost hit him with a kunai.

“How nice of you. You weren’t even trying to kill an assassin like me?”

“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, Sakurai Yosuke. Don’t think that just because I’m old that I would go easy on you. I haven’t gone senile. Come quick.”

Yosuke placed his fingers on his fist and turned to the iron door behind him. Suddenly, Itsuki regained his control on his body. He didn’t understand what happened except for the fact that Yosuke was able to freeze him somehow.

“Raaaahh!!!”

“I said enough!”

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

“GAA—!!”

*\*Bang! …Thud!\**

“K-Ku…!”

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

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

Yosuke 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. Yosuke placed his hand on the iron door, then followed by a blue light tracing the gap between the double doors. When the light disappeared, he pushed the doors and revealed the other side. 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!?”

Yosuke 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 to 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 to what anyone would think getting hit by a truck would be like. He was flung to the wall after getting hit. His barrier took most of the damage, but it was still too weak to completely shield him. 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.

After clearing a few meters, he came to a sudden stop and waited a few seconds before continuing. He repeated that as many times as he could and breezed through without getting hit.

“Ha-ha! Take that old man!”

Five minutes later. Yosuke 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 blue light to come from the middle and make a square around his hand. Lights from above lit up the room to reveal the contents of the chamber. There were multiple stone balls swinging like a pendulum 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 a piston. 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 half-way across. Yosuke placed his hand on the same stone panel that he used to turn on the lights. The same blue lights appeared and stopped the stone balls from swinging and the log pistons for thrusting. He approached the half-dead Itsuki and touched his forehead. It was then that Itsuki’s eyes returned to normal and focused them on Yosuke.

“Good, you’re still alive. Follow me when you feel like it. You have five minutes to rest. Any more and you’ll regret it.”

Itsuki tilted his head to the side to see Yosuke heading towards the exit.

“That arrogant geezer… Tsk!”

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

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing? Sit up straight. Just because you’re tired doesn’t mean you can laze around! We’re still 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 couldn’t handle it? I didn’t 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 Yosuke at any time. Yosuke glared back at him as he taunted him.

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

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

“Good.”

Yosuke made a satisfied nod and walked around the room.

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

“Ha?”

“Why did I attack you, and why did I trap 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’d 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!”

Yosuke 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 loud mouth did the same to me before.”

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

“Like I care.”

*\*Slam!!\**

Yosuke 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 Yosuke was willing to continue their lesson.

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

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

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

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

“It was utterly stupid.”

“Ha?”

“What you did yesterday, was absolutely stupid.”

Itsuki was baffled from what he had heard. On 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 Yosuke.

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

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

“You idiot!”

“OW!”

Yosuke smacked his head with his wooden sword.

“What’s your problem!?”

“You don’t 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?”

Yosuke sighed as he facepalmed.

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

He tapped Itsuki’s chair to get his attention.

“Listen up, the flash strike isn’t 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 power. You use 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 otaku use it like that? Is there something he’s doing that I’m not?”

“No. There’s nothing like that. He’s using consecutive flash strikes with the same consequences. The only difference about you and him, is that he has Ryosei-kun with him. With him in control, it doesn’t matter if Yukou-kun’s body isn’t 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 won’t allow you. What happened yesterday was beginner’s luck. If I don’t deem you fit, you are banned for ever using flash strike consecutively.”

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

Itsuki got up his seat and used flash strike to close the distance between him and Yosuke. 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—!!”

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

“Listen up! You’re nowhere near being a strong hunter! You’re weak! You realize that, that’s why you’re here, isn’t it!? If you keep riding your high horse, you have no place here in the Konjou Clan! If you don’t shape up, you’ll 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 Yosuke 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 Yosuke’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 Yosuke. 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 complain. 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’ll be fine.”

“I know.”

Itsuki took deep breaths and prepared himself before a set of iron double doors. Yosuke 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!”

Yosuke signaled the beginning of the test. Itsuki ran straight into the dark room. The door closed behind him, closing off every 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, 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.

*\*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 noise that reverberated around the room as it deflected every blade.

\**“You’re a brute. Whether your goal is to protect or to attack, don’t let anything stop you. Getting hit isn’t the end of you. Decide on an action and follow through. You have no time to hesitate.”\**

Itsuki remembered Yosuke’s words from his training. It echoed in his mind like a spirit that’s 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 breaking reached his ear as the explosion destroyed the last of his barrier’s durability. But despite that, he didn’t stop running.

\**“Your barrier is just another layer of your thick defense. Don’t falter just because it’s 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 thrusted 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 like they do. But that doesn’t mean that we can’t 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. Which 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 imbedded 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 in 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 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 Yosuke 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, Yosuke 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 his body. Normally spirit power was limited to the body and the objects its in contact with. But this ability summons spirit power from the end of a person’s limbs. An example of this was the 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 wrapped his arms with kindle and used that external spirit power as the horns that took the blunt of the blow and destroyed it. The main power comes from the spirit power while he supported it with his own body… I was right. He has potential.”*

Itsuki walked up to Yosuke.

“See that? That was me. Come on, lets advance to the next level!”

“Enough. This was only level 3 of this training facility. You have time to grow, don’t rush it.”

“Ugh, fine. Well, is that all or do you have another lesson?”

“We’ll 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 something behind Yosuke’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 didn’t, you would’ve had even less time to prepare. You don’t 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’ll 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’m 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, hm, hm. Very well, I’ll take on this measly mission of yours.”

“Like 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’ll have to prepare. Because you’re going to Hokkaido.”

“…Eh?”

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 Yosuke just before he left.

**…………**

“Remember, your mission is to find the rumored half-moon wolf. We’ve confirmed from sightings that the wolf is a creature from Zerid. Be careful and don’t underestimate it.”\*

“…”

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 Yosuke forgot to say. But he wasn’t forgetting a single thing.

“No. That’s all. Now go or you’ll 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 test 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 rumored wolf that was infamous to the locals.

Stories mention of people seeing a shadow of a wolf near the river at night. Completely dark when within the shadows, and as bright as the moon above when up above the highlands. 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.

Yosuke 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 Yosuke 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 stuff inside it. Since he had nothing else to do, he returned to the rock he sat on earlier. He breathed a long sigh releasing strain on his body before sitting down. There wasn’t anything else to look at besides trees and water. But that wasn’t what Itsuki thought.

“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 that a glace. He had no time for cave exploring.

Having finished his scout, he sat down by a tree and ate a snack and drank a bottle of water. it was about 5 in the afternoon, just a few more hours before the sun sets. 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, but some place similar. Inside a forest like this, standing against a tree like this, with a frightening growling like this, and finding a convenient rock on the ground like this… is where it all started.”\**

He recalled a distant memory, but it was also 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 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 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 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 that 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 the clan in the last few days.

“Then I’ll just have to do this the old-fashioned way—”

\**“You’re allowed to use flash strike, but never consecutively. I haven’t allowed you that yet. Remember, flash strike isn’t an all-powerful skill. It has its flaws. Don’t rely on it too much.”\**

Just before Itsuki was about to use flash strike, he remembered Yosuke’s warning about the skill. He grit his teeth in frustration. He couldn’t think of anything else he can 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. In an instant, Itsuki was able to close the distance by half. He was still behind, but he didn’t enter another 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 less than the distance Itsuki cleared in a single flash strike. Even if he falls behind a small bit, one more flash strike will be enough for him to catch the wolf.

“I got you now! Prepare yourself!”

He empowered his legs once more, launching himself into the air and falling straight at the fleeing wolf. If the wolf continued to run, he would land directly on it. Noticing that, the wolf stopped and let out a huge howl.

“AROOOOOO!!!!!”

“What!?”

It wasn’t any normal howl. Before Itsuki 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. Everything around him was 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 looked around him and saw the same wolves hiding within the shadows. Their heads became visible but the other half of their bodies was 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 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 heavy punch vertical 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 going 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 and bashed them into each other. Meanwhile, before the wolves reached his legs, he stomped the ground, creating a shockwave that 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 barriers, stuck with their fangs floating just above his skin. He launched them away by kicking 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 huge openings for the enemies to ponce onto whenever he was attacking. In fact, there were more openings than the number of wolves that attacked on 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 worry of what was around him. That was because he already knew where they were.

After defending himself against the wolves, his vision returned to normal. He immediately searched his surroundings but the wolf was 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 with my prey. I think he will be a nuisance. I must get dispose… 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 being there, but for some reason they were able to witness the fight that occurred.

**…………**

“Mm~ Ichika’s cooking really is incredible!”

The sun set and the moon was high up in the sky. The forest was covered in darkness and the only light source around was coming from the lone tent by the lake. Inside it, Itsuki was enjoying the bento box Ichika prepared from 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 Yosuke made. He didn’t know the details himself but he left it all to him.

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 a 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.

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 before deciding on where to go. Even before rotating in a full circle, it was quite obvious where that is. Smoke was floating up the sky at 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 his 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 outlook 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 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 tree from the fire and placed the palms of his hands on it. He used his spirit energy to increase its toughness. With enough spirit energy the tree will strong enough so that it wouldn’t catch fire.

“Alright!”

Itsuki switched 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 from behind 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 looked over to its source, he saw a wolf. But its wasn’t the same one he saw earlier. Its fur was back with a few tinges of white. It came out of the shadows with a vicious face. It glared at Itsuki with bloodshot eyes and growled threateningly as it approached him.

“What!? You’re…”

Itsuki was surprised when the light 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!?”

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 loud 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 like 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 where 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 intense wind coming from the ground. It was 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 that very location.

“Grrr… I would usually hunt my prey loose and hunt him 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 in lightning speed and attacked him. They bared their fangs and bit him all over as well as sharp claws from their paws. 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 hurling 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 form the wolves made it so that Itsuki could barely understand 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, completely white with pitch black eyes. It jumped out of the ground and came at him with an open mouth, revealing its razor-sharp fangs. The wolf swallowed him whole and closed its mouth with a resounding 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 was out of control. Although his barrier managed to take on all of the damage, it took him all of his strength to bare against the horror that he faced. He mentally exhausted since a hunter’s mental state is what 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. 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 covered him in it. Itsuki could feel it. His ears were being broken, reducing all of the sounds he could perceive to only ringing. He could feel his body weaking and his eyes spinning around in confusion. He could barely function.

“Now, I’ll rid you from this world like the cockroach 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 him air and tried to dodge the wolves. It was apparent that he was dodging the correct direction to avoid some of the wolves, but he still got hit and all of the wolves successfully clung to him. He was too slow. Whether it was from 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 uses a spirit power like an advance radar to sense anything within 5 meters. Even with his hearing dulled, he could still use his perception field normally.

*\*Crack… Shatter!\**

It was only a matter of time, and it finally arrived. The wolves successfully broke his barrier and exposed his bare skin. They continued 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 power!”\**

Just before Itsuki used transcendence, Yosuke’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 in order for it to be engraved in his very soul.

“Haahh…”

He took another deep breath and slid his hands all other his arms and fists. The wolves kicked him towards the ground and fled. Everyone 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 wolf 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 completely stretched his arm, came an explosion and a large image of a blue fist shooting into the wolf’s mouth. Another explosion followed the moment they made contact. The fist took on the wolf head on and stopped its approach, ultimately cancelling 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.

“GAHH…!”

Blue arms covered his own arms to strengthen his defense. It was kindled spirit power, similar to what he used to launch a fist into the wolf’s mouth. He applied it when he rubbed his arms and fists. He managed to block one of the paws, but the other broke through and left a large scratch on his arm.

Itsuki was already getting tired, but then 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 his breath 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, did a forceful backflip and crouched in mid-air to reach the wolf hanging on the back of his foot with its mouth 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 the kindled spirit power he reapplied to his arms while he was spinning around.

“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 large paws. It was an all-out attack.

But he didn’t panic. A grin appeared on his face. While he was floating parallel to the ground, he summoned air footholds directly behind his feet and used flash strike to quickly angle himself upright, followed by another pair of footholds followed by another flash strike going directly above him.

He turned his grin to a 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 his fist directly inside the half-moon wolf’s mouth. 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 and paws, the white ground, and the darkness disappeared the moment it made contact with it.

This was a part of his plan. He purposely focused on the ground and his sides, barely even 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 fire that was burning the trees was still right beside them. He laid on the ground with ragged breath, profuse sweating, multiple scratch and bite marks, and blood flowing out those very wounds. It took him about a minute before forcing himself to stand up.

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 another 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. Because in the time he was lying on the ground, he regained enough energy to produce his barrier. And a single wolf definitely wasn’t enough to destroy it. Itsuki stopped moving upon realizing something.

“…Its breathing. Its… real…!”

The wolf was breathing. Unlike the clones he fought earlier, they didn’t breathe. They were just illusions that served to fight. 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. Since the last time he strengthened a tree, the forest fire hadn’t gotten too out of control. It spread which meant that he had to strengthen a few more trees but it was still within his ability to trap the fire. He was exhausted, but he still had spirit power.

He strengthened all the trees and successfully trapped the fire. If he had to say, his spirit power was around 40%. Although his fight with the half-moon wolf was intense, he didn’t use was 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 I wouldn’t have to be like this…”

\**“Your mission is to find the rumored half-moon wolf.”\**

He remembered the very words Yosuke used to give him his mission. Followed by the time earlier that day where he chased after the grey wolf. Back then, he didn’t see any dark ripples come out its mouth. 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 wouldn’t have looked too much of a bad figure to them. 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, and that it came from Zerid. There were no reports of attacks or anything that would have gotten the attention of the clan. But if the clan’s connections and information circuit is as big as it is, they would have gotten word of this even without any attacks. He sent Itsuki in a mission to use his head more, not to get rid of a wolf.

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 black burn marks all over it, 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.

“Now, who the hell did this!? Is there another monster I don’t know about!? Whatever it is, its 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 all magic. Of course, there was a limit to what it could resist, seeing as it was burnt down either way. But there was no chance any normal human could do this. He figured whatever burnt down 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, his wounds were still open. It couldn’t heal wounds and injuries the same way magic can. He walked over to the rock he sat on before and 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 afternoon time when Itsuki was still scouting the area of his camp out. Yosuke was sitting on a bench of 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.

“Oh? Good afternoon, Sakurai-ojii-san. I didn’t think I’d see you here.”

“I should be the one saying that to you, Shimizu-dono.”

The person who greeted Yosuke 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’ve finished all of my work, which is why I’m resting. I don’t 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.”

“Hm…”

Yosuke took a sip of green tea before responding to her.

“He has a lot of potential. It wouldn’t be strange if he manages to become the strongest brute of the clan.”

“Oh? That’s reassuring, especially since its 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 wasn’t 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 wasn’t anything more than a school bully with a lot of raw strength. He tried to scare off actual fighters with a mysterious skill that they’ve 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 weren’t for the transcendence Ryosei-kun taught him.”

“Aren’t you just being cold again? Then, how did he win that fight?”

“…Halfway into the fight, he changed. He was drove into a corner leaving him with only one choice—to fight. Before he was only cowering behind his power. But in that moment, I saw he had something none of the other hunters possessed. Incredible primal instinct and an 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-kun said the same. He had a difficult time with him in group practices, but apparently, he didn’t know he never learned those skills. This is why I kept telling him to be more observant.”

“U-Uhuh, I remember you scolding him for that in the past…”

“…Except for flash strike tactics, these 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, incorporated them to his own 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’s learned his lesson will completely depend on this. He’s up against two other worldly 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’ll be able to teach himself unbreakable again to survive. If not, then he’ll just use transcendence and fail.”

Yoshiko recalled the function of the skill Unbreakable. It makes spirit power run all over 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. Which means unbreakable’s effectiveness is highly dependent on the person’s will power.

A smirk showed in Yosuke’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 re-learn preceptive field.”

“H-He’s quite the character, isn’t he?”

“He’s rude and complains a lot. But it wasn’t so hard when I finally got him to respect me. In the end, he’s a straightforward and earnest kid who was blinded by the definition of power. And he’s 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 it 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 that the forest fire already died down. There was only a little bit 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 cause tonight’s fires. There didn’t seem to be anything around until…

“AROOOO!!!”

“Huh?”

He heard a distant howl. It was then same howling the he kept hearing in his battle earlier.

“AROOOO!!!”

“…”

It was the half-moon wolf. It kept howling from over the distance. He noticed that the wolf always howled before an attack. If that was the case, then it could only mean that 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. The howls lasted for about three minutes before abruptly stopping. He picked up the pace. He knew exactly what was happening. He was being used. The forest fire, the fight with the half-moon wolf, burning down, 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 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 something that was a sure-fire clue.

“Hey! Over there!”

Itsuki shouted at someone, or more appropriately, something. He ran over to a wolf in the distance, 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 in order 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. 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 meters 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 was 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. He left it behind and set his focus directly in front of him.

He arrived at a huge opening. It had huge rocks 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 by the 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?”

He dropped his bag and rushed the eye. He could feel his wounds hurting every time he moved abruptly, 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 and was about to drive his fist into the eye. But suddenly, he used flash strike to jump backwards. 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, omnidirectional sensory, supersonic dashes, empowered defenses, low-tier magic, 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 destroy all of me at once!”

Multiple eyes appeared from behind rocks and small crevices. They surrounded him covering the ceiling and around the cave. 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 save flash strike for later and ran towards the nearest eye around him. He ran in a strange way, turning left and right. Without the use of flash strike, he only had less than a second to react and get of the way if they shot another laser. Instead of escaping, he hoped to mess up their aim by moving in a strange way.

“I see you.”

“Kgh!”

But even that didn’t work. His barrier successfully blocked the laser, but he couldn’t afford to get hit anymore. Since his barrier was still weak from the earlier battle, it would only take two more hit before it broke.

He picked himself up and continued running towards the eye. It glowed, signaling it was about to shoot. At that moment, he stopped running in a weird way and ran straight at it. 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.

“Pesky eyes!”

Itsuki thrusted 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 backwards to dodge it. The eye missed its laser, meanwhile, multiple lasers surrounded that eye, leaving no room for anything to be near it. If Itsuki chased after it, he would’ve been bombarded with those very lasers, piercing not only his barrier but his body as well. He was safe, but now he was 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 that him 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 many other things depending on their species.

\**“Bodies! Its tricking 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 rock, but he wrapped his hand in spirit power and drove his fist into it either way. 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 rock. He threw the rocks at the lasers but only to be disintegrated and continued heading towards him. He dodged to the side and avoided it.

“It works.”

After reaching the rock, he looked around and saw a few eyes glowing and hid behind the rock. 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. 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 did a backflip, dodging the lasers and returning to his original location.

“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 laser of blue light funneled through all of the holes and shot down all the eyes that shot a laser through the rock. Along with the eyes, the rock got demolished, revealing nothing else but the other side of the cave. Seeing that his target wasn’t there, he ran to the next rock.

“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.”

“Shut your yaps!”

Itsuki continued to destroy rock after rock, clearing any possible hiding spot. But the moment he demolished the last rock, he ended up with nothing. The eyes that he destroyed only came back, and the cave was clear of any other hiding spot.

“I told you. I noticed you saw through my lie. I never thought a lower species like you would know 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 covered 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 backwards. Having sure he was safe, a grin showed on his face…

“Hehe! I got you—”

But only to be destroyed the moment he saw what happened to the barrier.

“What!?”

He planned on using the lasers against his enemy by making him shoot lasers directly at the barrier. But contrary to his expectations, the barrier was better than ever. The cracks that he managed to inflict on it were completely fixed. He was sure he dodged the lasers, so that only meant that they 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 of the little amount of spirit power he has left. He felt that he had about 22% left. Destroying all of the rocks 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 strike as much as he could and 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 wasn’t as many eyes shooting at him. He dodged the remaining lasers 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. After realizing that, he grabbed from his bag his greatest weapon. The hunting flashlight.

“HAVE A TASTE OF MY GREATEST WEAPON, 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. The reason the light was able to pass through the barrier was because 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.

“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 not Itsuki.

Instead, he ran past it and used flash strike into the wall. A pair of razor-sharp serrated blades appeared from the wall and closed in his neck like a pair of scissors, but it was too slow. Before the blades even appeared through the wall, Itsuki had already dodged it and dashed through the wall like it wasn’t even there. What the blades were about to hit was only an afterimage from his quick transition to a flash strike.

From behind the wall was like a 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 perceptive 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 a hostage this whole time.

It rolled on the ground and slowed down, but its suffering was yet to end. Itsuki used the force from his flash strike to smash it under his foot 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 and the opening under it seemed to be its mouth. It had four arms, two smaller ones and two larger ones with sawblades, three 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 rushing at him again with his fist so it used its razor-sharp sawblades to intercept it. Suddenly, he threw his punch in mid-air and 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 came. That would lower its chances of breaking his barrier but he would block both attacks.

“!?”

It was a smart move. Unfortunately for it, Itsuki’s kindled fist was much more powerful than it expected. It tried to increase its defense by swinging his other arm, but he was too slow. The moment it tried that, Itsuki was already under his own kindled fist and thew 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 axe 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 at its limit. Taking a few more attacks mean 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 location Itsuki was at 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 huge barrier where his enemy stood in the middle of. He could hear it struggling to speak as its voice echoed through the cave.

“…I-I-I-I made t-too many miscalculations! I w-will grant you the honor of my true power! I will show 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 judgement. Darkness in the sky is the 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 its, but it was intercepted by a barrage of lasers from the eyes around the cave.

“The fleeing mass is only 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. Whatever those eyes were, they are clearly important.

“And the hapless bunch that receives its judgement 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 constantly sparked purple lighting hitting anything inside the clouds. Itsuki was no exception. He couldn’t move a muscle and he could feel 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. Loud crackling of thunder could be heard like lightning was striking inside the cave. Then, all the eyes that spread through the cave glowed in a purple light. Similar to a light show, constant beams of purple lasers shot through the cave, all of them moving around in a coordinated fashion so that every inch of the cave was shot hit by the lasers. 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. So much that purple lightning was 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. 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 stood. It stayed inside its protection, panting heavily for air. The eye in its center produced smoke from its intense all-out attack. Normally, magic doesn’t come from the body, but this creature from Zerid clearly used 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 being suffocated by the dark fog. He was supposed to be stunned from the lightning, but he was able to break through using a brute skill that Yosuke never taught him. Unbreakable. The very same skill that released him from the effects of the half-moon wolf’s magic.

His unbreakable will, stubbornness, and unwavering resolve caused him to go forward. However, every time he broke past, it didn’t take long for him to be stunned again but only to be broken free. He experienced a series of getting stunned and broken free over and over again and slowly made his way to the river that was 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 made. Its barrier was created and strengthen through connecting multiple of its floating eyeballs, but there weren’t any eyes placed under the water. He swam through and surfaced to the creature blasting its enormous laser through the cave. He slowly approached it so that it doesn’t hear him approaching 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 had most of its fur completely white with small tinges of black. It must have been how its body functioned with magic. But not only that, he saw that it was conscious and was staring straight at him. 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 and took out bandages and approached the wolf. It was wary of him and stepped back and growled.

“What? You don’t want me to stop your bleeding?”

“What kind of sightseer fights a monster from another world and same another monster?!”

“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, 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 by peering its sunlight through its narrow openings. He was about to head out 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 habitants.”

The pack of wolves left him alone and disappeared into the trees. Itsuki watched as they left and faced back to the path out 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.”

**Chapter 4:**

“Who are you?”

A dark figure appeared in front of me. A round blob of black and purple with ominous red eyes and dark cinders emerging from its fiery head that was just below the height of my waist. It was similar to slimes you would find in games or any other fantasy entertainment media but with its top aflame. It responded to me in a creepy 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 now. It won’t be long now… you’re absolute end.”

“Eh…?”

I had no idea what it was saying at the time. I had just come to, 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.

“…”

I slowly opened my eyes and 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 only 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 almost impossible to destroy, I sit on top of cold, hard cement that was a sorry excuse for a bed with lifeless eyes as I am 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 a week 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 current state.

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-kun here explain your situation. It would be best if he did it.”

“…Ryosei-kun?”

*\*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 meet you finally, 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 Senkyo and Yuu, 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 tried to guess what could have hinted my lie, it would’ve been my eyes 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?

“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 came to 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 just 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 at 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 in my lie 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 getting annoying, but hearing the horror that became of me from him was 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.

*\*“I am you, and you are me. You have gone far into the darkness. There’s no escaping it now. It won’t be long now you’re 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 a part of me and is set to plague me 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 a life time 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 LIFE TIME 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 it. The line that would torture my mental state 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 reduced chances for a normal happy lifestyle… 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 KNOW EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED TO ME OLD GEEZER! DEATH WOULD’VE 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’re a danger to everyone around you. You can’t control your temper, and you don’t even know what you’re 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 here. 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 JAIL EVEN THOUGH I’M CLEARLY THE VICTIM! HOW CAN I STAY CALM!?”

“…”

I thrusted 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. It can feel my knuckles numbing from the thrust. 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 thrusted my fist yet again, but this time, with my other fist. But it didn’t change anything. The bars didn’t even bend, he was still staring at me with the 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’re a veteran hunter of the Konjou clan, it’ll be hard but focus. Despite your state, there are still people that are willing to stand by your side. Don’t lose them.”

“I DON’T WANT YOUR PHILOSOPHICAL BULLSHIT! GET ME OUT OF HERE!!”

“I said what I had to. Whatever you do, don’t 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 come back.

**…………**

“Yo! How you doin’? Looks like you’ve calmed down a bit.”