**Chapter 1:**

**196 – Dark Abyss**

*“\*I’m sorry.\*”*

A voice resonated in the dark, empty abyss. Those words weighed on him, bringing him even further down, sinking into the deep ocean of the void, the depths wrapping around his body in a frigid casket. For once, he tried to open his eyes and saw sunlight peering through the dark water and shining down on him. Was he given hope? No. All it did was remind him of the shape of the gash that tore through his light. A pale, crude blade drew deep crimson liquid that stained the sky-blue cloth of his sun. Light crimson rain fell on him, as if imitating the thin, silky hair of his beloved who was suffering.

“Kgh…”

He closed his eyes and averted his gaze. Seeing such a sight was too much for him to bear. It hurt to see her suffer. It didn’t matter what little detail entered his eyes. All of it would inadvertently remind him of her. He couldn’t take his mind off it.

“Choose.”

A deep voice came from the dark depths behind him. What could it have been? What voice could be so loud that it would echo through the thick water and reach his ears? Nothing. He must have been hallucinating.

“Let go of everything and sink into nothingness. Become one with nature and cleanse your mind through death. Or perhaps, struggle once more to find a possibility that can mend even the sun’s wounds. Transcend the weight of fate and swim through the vast ocean you call life. Make a choice. There is no room for hesitation.”

“A… choice?”

What was it? What was it that made the words of the dark abyss so persuasive? Was this the same voice maniacs and psychopaths hear and bring them further from normality? Or maybe it was just his mind tricking himself in order to cope with the situation. After all, it seemed like the voice was playing along with his madness, personifying everything around him to his recent tragedy. But he would never know. However, there was one fact he was sure about. It was the fact that this voice was arousing the flame that had died in his body.

There was a time when he would not have cared about any of this. If he was stabbed in a corner or run over by a speeding vehicle, he would have simply refrained from meaningless struggle and accepted it as a part of life. If he was saved by cutting-edge technology then he would consider that a lucky coincidence.

However, he had changed. He found something to struggle for, someone he would lay down his life for. Dying for that person was certainly an option, but that is not fit for this situation at the very least. His current deathly state was the reason she was pierced in the heart, to begin with. If he died now, then his only legacy would be how he was a loser who brought ruin to others.

Last he saw, she was clearly stabbed in the heart. If she was human, she’d have died. But she wasn’t. She was a vampire. In the first place, do vampires who require an abundant supply of blood even have something as fragile as a heart? Maybe something similar, but most likely not the same. It could all be his desperation talking, but what if she was still alive?

If so, then she would be suffering somewhere on the brink of death. Even if he chose to move now, he would be too late, but that wasn’t the problem. It was the fact that he was accepting such a fate. If he was truly willing to die for her sake, then he would also be willing to live for her sake. His situation mattered not. Even if he was in a worse state than she was, that mattered not. The only thing of importance was getting to her side and saving her life, but looking around, this was not a place he could do that.

“To save as many lives as you can along with your own. As long as you live, you will save. And as long as you’re alive, you will continue to use your power to protect.”

Those were the words that Ryosei lived by when he was a hunter, Senkyo felt like it was a shame that he had to throw away those words, but right now, he could feel them resonating inside him more than ever.

“I… will save you.”

His voice was muffled by the water, bringing only bubbles of air to the surface.

“I won’t let you apologize here.”

His voice began to clear.

“I won’t let it end here! I will LIVE!”

He shouted it the dark water, his voice as clear as his determination. Such a feat was impossible, but fitting for someone who chose to challenge the line between what is possible and what is not.

“Very well.”

The abyss responded. Along with that came a mysterious force that pushed his sinking body behind him, bringing him closer and closer to the sunlight piercing through the water's surface. Challenging the impossible, he pushed through the heavy water and reached out to it as it filled his vision.

**197 – Third Mastery**

“I will… live!”

He exclaimed once more, but now significantly softer than his earlier shouts. As his blurry vision cleared, he noticed that his outstretched hand was reaching for a lantern hanging on the ceiling. His senses returned to him, but he wasn’t feeling the same as usual. There was a strange tingle coming from all over his body, and what was even more peculiar was the fact that they were not coming from above his skin, but instead inside his body. One particular spot was the palm of his outstretched hand. He inspected it, but there was nothing that seemed wrong with it. Then, the sound of splashing water accompanied by a loud metallic clang pierced his eardrums, making him flinch and turn his head towards the source. There, he saw a familiar face.

“O…Onii-chan?”

She muttered under her breath, but enough for Senkyo to hear it.

“Y-Yeah… Hey there, Shiro-chan.”

“Onii-chan!”

Tears climbed down her cheeks as she heard his response. The overflowing emotions took over and caused her to pounce on him with one arm open.

“W-Wha!?”

But after hearing his voice spike in surprise, she was brought back to her senses and quickly kicked the wall beside her, sending herself away from Senkyo, hurling towards the floor beside him, ending the event with an awful tumble face-first to the ground. It seemed like she realized jumping on top of a bedridden person right after they woke up was a bad idea.

“S-Shiro!? Are you okay!?”

“M-Mrf… Shyrho ish… ofkeii!”

Hearing her speak in broken words made Senkyo doubt her claim. Despite that, she bounced right back up and properly faced him as if nothing happened.

“More importantly, are you okay, Onii-chan!? Does it hurt anywhere!?”

Shiro brings up one of her arms to him but doesn’t touch him. Senkyo could tell she was being overly careful with him, treating him like a precious vase that would shatter to high-pitch noise. But in truth, he was feeling perfectly fine. There was a strange tingle in his body but he did not feel weakened.

On the contrary, the same could not be said for Shiro. Looking at her carefully, she had green vines wrapping around her left arm, strapping it tightly to her body. From his memories with Freda, it was a vine called Vino that wrapped around anything that touched it. It was interesting how she used it, but he didn’t let his slight amazement disregard the fact that she kept it from moving and let her right arm make her worried gestures. Recalling the past events, that arm was held by her left shoulder which the spear-thrower skeleton pierced.

“I should be the one asking you that! Is your shoulder alright!?”

Senkyo jumped out of the bed to face her properly, examining the shoulder wrapped in vines. Seeing this made her widen her eyes, and soon after widened her smile as she hugged him tightly with one arm.

“S-Shiro?”

“Thank goodness you’re alive… thank goodness…”

She tightened her embrace and buried her head in his chest, rubbing him with her cheeks as she relished in his warmth. This reminded him that he wasn’t the only one hurting from recent events. He could vividly remember Yuu’s figure when she saved him from being taken which made him want to jump right into action. But seeing Shiro’s relived figure made him calm down. The very least he could do for her was to wait for her to recover.

Looking around, it seemed they were inside some kind of cave hideout. The room mostly contained bones that caught dust from being left alone for so long, but the makeshift bed and end table next to him showed clearly that this space was no bedroom and was only used to house him temporarily. This was all Shiro’s doing. The end table was covered with cloth, hiding its raw, rocky texture to make it more appealing. Additionally, it was filled with a wooden bowl of water and food that was similar to boiled spinach on top of clean leaves. Meanwhile, the bed that held his body was only an elevated floor with cloth covering it, but his body was laying in a soft material. If he had to guess, it had to be wool or at least something similar. If he was reading the situation correctly, Shiro built these to take care of him while he was out cold. If Senkyo decided to shove her off after all her hard work, saving Yuu will be the least of her worries. His conscience wouldn’t let him hear the end of it.

A few minutes passed and Shiro finally decided to detach herself from Senkyo. She decided to inform him of their current situation, but first, there was something she had to get out of the way first.

“S-Shiro is so sorry, Onii-chan! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!”

“W-Whoa, whoa, whoa! What’s this all of the sudden!? Whatever it is, it’s fine!”

She groveled and brought her forehead to the ground to apologize to him, but all that ended up doing was making Senkyo feel uncomfortable in the situation. He wanted her to get up and tried to pull her up but she vehemently insisted that her head stayed on the ground.

“S-Shiro made a huge mistake, and she let Onii-chan get hurt badly because of it! S-Shiro is so sorry! S-Shiro is…”

Just as Senkyo thought, he was not as lucky as his healthy body suggested. He could remember the spikes suddenly sprouting out of the wall, as well as the sensation of cold stone piercing his skin and shattering bones. Shiro was most likely apologizing for that. Realizing this, he kneeled down to her and placed a hand on her shoulder to comfort her.

“Shiro, I know you. You aren’t the type to let your guard down just because I seemed invincible. There must have been something else to prevent your barrier from erecting. We may not know what it is, but I know you aren’t to blame. I genuinely believe that.”

“Onii-chan…”

Senkyo remembered everything. Not a single memory broke off from his mind. In his blazing rage, he activated one of the main functions of Kuro Yaiba, the Release Factor. Even Ryosei wasn’t too sure of how it worked, but by sacrificing the owner’s own blood and emotion, the blade will transform and empower the owner, releasing a zone where they are in full control of. This explained how he was able to summon chasms and wither trees only for them to return to normal the moment he stopped his skill. Those obstacles were not real, but they were also not fake. It was the extension of Kuro Yaiba’s power.

“S-Shiro thinks… when Onii-chan released the armor he was wearing, the substance that created it stayed on Onii-chan’s body which blocked Shiro’s magic. As a familiar, Shiro’s magic will never intercept Onii-chan’s magic, but…”

Shiro trailed off, thinking hard about how to deliver the remainder of her message. It seemed that she was trying to doubt herself, but Senkyo’s trusting look made her come to a decision.

“What it was made of was not magic… but spirit power.”

“H-Huh!? Are you sure!?”

“Yes. Although Shiro has no power to see traces of spirit power, she has the power to see traces of mana. Since Shiro did not see any mana, the power had to have been spirit power.”

Senkyo was shocked to hear Shiro’s claim, not because he didn’t know spirit power could be used that way, but because of an entirely different reason. One that stemmed from the memory of Konjou Ryosei.

“Wait, that can’t be.”

“Why is that, Onii-chan?”

“It’s just that… In Ryosei’s memories, he didn’t find any traces of spirit power, so we always assumed it was mana. It made sense since it’s a spectral, but if that isn’t the case, then what…?”

Senkyo gazed at Shiro inquisitively, but her widened eyes showed no signs that she had the ability to answer his question. She was just as shocked as he was. It was then that Senkyo recalled the prophecy that Freda told him: Born from the thirst for power, he holds the gift of the three masteries.

“Is this… the third mastery?”

The source of the Release Factor’s power was neither mana nor spirit power, so the only logical conclusion was that it was the third mastery. However, Senkyo didn’t want to accept that yet. Not because he was afraid of not being human, but because of the fact that it was so mysterious that not even Shiro, the person he thought would know his secrets, was informed of this power. For now, he decided to lock that power away and use it only for the direst of times. There was no point in pursuing unknown powers, for now, he needed to assess the situation and focus on working with what they knew they had.

“Then, Shiro. Could you please tell me what happened after I passed out, and if possible, everything you know about me?”

“Okay, Onii-chan.”

Shiro replied immediately. She anticipated the question and prepared for it. Senkyo sat back down on the bed and listened carefully.

**198 – Eight Seals**

After chasing down the skeleton through the rift, they arrived in Zerid. It was because of the Traveler’s Gem the skeleton used. After cutting down the skeleton, a trap that it had set activated and skewered Senkyo. Due to an unknown force, Shiro’s barrier did not activate and brought him to a fatal condition. Two spikes penetrated his left arm, four penetrated his right arm, two on his left lung, one on his right lung, two on the stomach, three on the left leg, and one on the right leg. The spikes were already drenched with his blood and the glut was already making pools of blood below him. There was no recovering from those damages, even if Shiro used all her healing knowledge, the damages were too severe for her to do anything. He should have lost his life then and there.

Despite that, instead of hesitating, Ryosei cut down the spikes holding Senkyo and laid him down on the ground, all the while using poltergeist and Kuro Yaiba’s physical form to make contact with him. Since he was a spirit, he couldn’t touch physical objects, but one of those exceptions included Kuro Yaiba, which he used to handle the situation.

“Shiro, do something!”

He shouted at Shiro to snap out of it and begin healing him. Thanks to that, she began chanting the most powerful healing magic she knew. It wasn’t going to be enough, but she at least had to try. Then, as she was chanting, the rocks that were left inside Senkyo to reduce the bleeding suddenly broke into multiple pieces.

“W-Wha!?”

The sudden clatter caught both of their attention. They didn’t know why that happened, but Ryosei discarded that thought and immediately ran to him to stop his bleeding. Contrary to his expectations, not a single drop of blood dripped from any of the fifteen cavities on his body. To add to his surprise, a liquid-like pop entered his ears. He turned to see that Senkyo’s right arm had severed from his body. Much like the other holes, his arms refused to draw blood. Fear and panic began to sink into Ryosei so he turned to Shiro to shoot his questions, but before he could even ask anything…

“The wounds are… healing?”

Shiro slumped to the ground in relief. From Ryosei’s memory, she never finished chanting her spell. Then what was stopping Senkyo from bleeding to death? He didn’t know the answer, but seeing Shiro’s face, it was obvious she knew something.

“Shiro! What is this!? What’s happening to Senkyo!?”

He shouted at her, hurrying her for answers. She stayed silent for a moment, staring at the ground to ponder the question and whether or not this should be something she should be telling Ryosei, but eventually, she came to a decision.

“This is… one of Onii-chan’s abilities.”

“Abilities…? What do you…”

Although Ryosei was confused, he was not surprised. Senkyo and Shiro’s existences were clouded with mystery. If Shiro spoke of “abilities” then that meant Senkyo was no human, or at the very least not a normal one. It was then he recalled the prophecy Freda told them: Born from the thirst for power, he holds the gift of the three masteries. His wish heralds the flag of harmony. The commander of tranquility he is, but devoid of corruption he is not. Attaining such strength marks the beginning, and reaching its heights is the prelude to his fall.

“Then is this… the beginning?”

Ryosei uttered to himself as he connected Freda’s prophecy with their current situation. His train of thought was broken by Shiro as she continued to explain what was happening.

“No, the beginning happened the moment Shiro was released. She has been told by Onii-chan’s father that there are eight seals inside him. Each of these seals Onii-chan’s natural abilities. He did that so that Onii-chan could live a happy life as a normal human, but also told me that his normal life will end the moment Shiro is released, the first and foremost seal inside Onii-chan. After that seal is undone, the rest will unlock themselves if Onii-chan fulfills their conditions.”

Ryosei’s face curled uncomfortably as he listened to Shiro. She was basically saying that she would never have been set free if Senkyo’s life had never taken the road down the supernatural. She noticed this, but only replied with a melancholic smile and continued.

“Except for being able to control both spirit power and mana, Shiro was never told of the rest of Onii-chan’s power. This was probably because Yuuto-san wanted it this way. He told Shiro that the only way to unlock Senkyo’s true potential was to keep living and nothing else. Shiro isn’t smart like the both of you, but Shiro is certain that Yuuto-san said that because he wanted Onii-chan to live his life the way he wanted to, not because of conditions to unlock his power.”

“I see…”

As the two were talking, they heard strange squelching sounds coming from behind Ryosei. When they checked to see what it was, they saw that Senkyo’s cavities were being mended by strands of flesh and bone stretching and intertwining with each other, almost as if the hole was being sewn by his own body. The same was true for the base of Senkyo’s right shoulder, but instead of strands from opposite sides joining together, it was intertwining with itself. It seemed like it was trying to regrow its arm, similar to how a lizard regenerates their tail. This amazed the two, at the same time struck them with awe, but ultimately thankful Senkyo was going to return to normal.

**199 – Seventh Seal**

“…Which brings us here. Onii-chan has been asleep for four days since then.”

“So that’s what happened…”

Senkyo uttered as Shiro finished telling him the past events. He inadvertently shifted his gaze to his right arm which was once skewered by stone spikes and severed off his body, but now it was all back to normal, and the tingling feeling he was sensing throughout his body was the process of his body healing. This was not something humans were capable of, which drove home the fact that he wasn’t one, but that didn’t matter anymore. As long as Yuu didn’t mind that fact, then there was no reason for him to fret the subject.

He scanned the rest of his body and confirmed that all of it was in normal shape. He was reminded of its charred state before he even arrived in Zerid. His skin turned dry and leathery, riddled with black, white, brown, and yellow burn marks. He brushed over his skin with his hands to feel for those burn spots, just in case his vision was deceiving him, but when he reached his head, he confirmed that the event was no dream, as well as the fact that the rest of his burn marks were healed. His hair had been coated with fire and burnt most of them, reaching the scalp. In normal circumstances, his hair would never regrow due to the severity of the burn, but he could feel that his scalp had regenerated along with the rest of his body. Well, his current hair was a different story, though. It seems like whatever regeneration he had didn’t include growing hair back to its usual hairstyle, but that was fine.

“Then, does this mean I released the seventh seal?”

Senkyo asked Shiro. Seeing as he never had a regeneration skill before, there was no other explanation but he still asked just in case.

“Yes. Although Shiro cannot open Onii-chan’s seals, she can tell whether or not they’ve been opened. Shiro can confirm that one of the seals has been released.”

“One of the seals? Not the seventh?”

“Yes. The order to release seals is quite flexible, so other seals are unnamed. Shiro heard from Yuuto-san that most of the seals are achievable without the power of other seals, but the ones that do usually have a strong indication. An example would be when Onii-chan first released Shiro. That would strictly be the eighth seal, a named seal, which has more power than normal ones.”

Senkyo nodded lightly as he processed Shiro’s information. Basically, the construction of the eight seals within him is like a multi-layered circle. The outermost layer consists of only one, but powerful seal that hides everything inside him. The layer after that seems to consist of multiple seals which can be unlocked without order. Then the inner layer will need the power of the preceding layer in order to be unlocked.

So as of this moment, he is currently on the second layer of seals. He can unlock the rest of the powers on this layer, but if chance allows it, he will be able to unlock a seal on the third layer if he completes its prerequisites by chance. Senkyo and Shiro didn’t quite understand the strength sealed in each layer, but they assumed that the deeper the layer, the greater the power.

“I see… But I wonder what caused it? Was it activating the release factor? Or maybe it was because I was on the brink of death?”

“Shiro doesn’t know, but she is certain it wasn’t because Onii-chan was about to die.”

“Hm? Why’s that?”

“That is because that was the seal condition of Onii-chan’s memories.”

“My memories…? Oh, yeah, now that you mention it, you’re right.”

Senkyo recalled the time when he was being fried alive by Fulgur’s lightning attacks. Just when he was about to lose consciousness, a memory of his father’s last message to him before he allegedly sealed his memories. After that, he chanted a spell to release the eighth seal, returning Shiro and his mana supply.

When the thought of mana crossed his mind, he remembered something important.

“Wait, why was I burnt by my own magic?”

Senkyo shot Shiro the question, but he saw the apologetic gaze in her eyes, giving him a good guess at what her answer would be.

“S-Shiro… does not know. It is true that users cannot be hurt by their own magic, but if it’s Onii-chan we’re talking about, then…”

“There are endless possibilities,” is what Senkyo felt she was going to say. He didn’t mind that. She did mention that his father never mentioned much to her, he believed that. There was no reason to lie about that, after all. However, he did recall Shiro saying something to him on their first meeting.

“What about my other memories? You said before that the old man sealed them away until ‘the time came,’ right? Isn’t that time now?”

Shiro seemed to be averting Senkyo’s gaze but she was trying her hardest not to. This was not a sign of her lying, but instead, it stemmed from the fact that she was going to give him an unfavorable answer. It was not something she wanted to give him, especially this time when he had just recovered from something horrible. But eventually, Shiro gathered her courage and told him directly.

“Shiro is sorry… this is, not yet that time…”

Senkyo thought he was ready for it, but he could still feel a tinge of annoyance tickle his heart, but if he had to fault anyone, it would be his father for giving Shiro the orders to keep quiet at all times until “that time” comes. Disregarding that, Senkyo placed his hand on Shiro’s head and pet her gently.

“You did well, Shiro.”

“Y-Yeah, thank you, Onii-chan…”

The two stayed like that for a moment, rewarding Shiro for doing a great job in this crisis.

**200 – Skeleton’s Hideout**

After that, Shiro urged Senkyo to follow her and walked the dark halls of the shelter. There were no torches on the walls or any kind of aesthetics. Whoever used this place used it for the bare minimum of what they needed to set out to do. You could call them minimalist, but Senkyo was sure that wasn’t the case. This cave was used by the skeletons as a temporary hideout, so to them, this was nothing but a good place to sit down after they had done their duties. To further prove Senkyo’s assumption, soft light on the walls finally reached his eyes, and when he entered the room with that light, he saw a campfire with three medium-sized rocks for people to sit around it, a large rectangular cavity on the cave wall that acted as some kind of work area, and the exit to the cave.

Senkyo took a peek outside out of curiosity and saw the starry sky above, with not one, but two moons decorating its cosmic blanket. Both of which could only be seen through a large geographic split above him, stone walls so high and steep that climbing them was a death wish. But maybe, if one fell from that height, their fall might be cushioned by the river flowing below them, or perhaps just drown as the raging rapids overpower their bodies. It was then that Senkyo realized that they were inside a ravine and the cave that he just left was elevated only a few meters above the rapids below him.

Having been satisfied with his search outside, he returned inside and took a good look around the area. It was a dreary place with nothing but a single campfire and a small lantern on top of the work area-like cavity. He saw no other paths that led to other areas, meaning this was everything here. The campfire held a pot that seemed to be boiling something. If he had to guess, it was the food that was on the bedside table earlier. Seeing as there was no greenery inside the cave meant that Shiro had to climb up the ravine to acquire their food. He made a mental note to reward her later.

He then approached the work area and found a few pieces of lightweight armor and cloth lying on the side, bony daggers and sickles as well as a fairly long spine-whip the skeleton used in their battle. And finally, two leaves of brown paper akin to wanted posters were laid in the middle of the work area, showing fairly recent images of both Senkyo and Yuu with a bone dagger stabbed into Yuu’s poster. That dagger was most likely used to carve the number fourteen on both papers.

“Hey, Shiro, do you have any idea what this means?”

Shiro walked up beside him and saw Senkyo pointing at the posters. Immediately, she responded.

“This is most likely the number of days the skeletons had to catch and bring Onii-chan and Yuu-chan to their clients. If that’s the case, then there are only three days left before they notice something wrong. If Ryosei-san doesn’t come back by then, Shiro and Onii-chan will leave before the enemy finds us.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

Shiro shifted her gaze in front of her and summoned a ball of light to rid of the darkness and reveal the map with a continent of unknown shape. It was one he had never seen before, but that would be natural as this was no longer Earth.

It was a map made from the same brown paper but with no landmarks or anything that would serve to be helpful for navigation. However, there was a series of red circles and crosses sprawled all over the map each pair connected with a line. Some pairs were scribbled out while some bared checkmarks, and the only pair unaccompanied with scribbles or checkmarks was a cross on the lower-center area connecting to a circle in the lower part of a nearby island.

“This is Yuwokrn. A continent of Zerid directly on top of Japan. The large body of land with the cross mark is the nation of Uikakrn and the thin but long detached island on the top right is the Zelaoage Empire. Shiro does not know the distance between the two since she’s never learned about it, but from what Ryosei-san theorized, since the skeletons were already expecting Yuu-chan to bring Onii-chan on that very day to intercept her, then he said it was likely that their client did not give they any leeway on schedule since the situation was similar to a pick-up job. Although he did add that this was all speculation and it could all be wrong.”

Senkyo nodded in understanding. She was basically saying there was no certainty of safety in their stay in that cave and that the enemy could visit them at any moment. The only thing keeping them in the area was a faulty theory and the fact that Senkyo was unconscious until just a few hours ago. But now that he was awake, it was high time they travel far away from the area as fast as possible. He was immersed in his thoughts of plans to leave, but then he realized something was off.

“Shiro, where’s Ryosei? He doesn’t seem to be inside me.”

“O-Oh, that… Um, Ryosei-san left to find a way back to Earth.”

“A way back? But didn’t we have those Traveler’s Gems? You brought one with you before you came here right?”

Senkyo wasn’t there personally, but he remembered her informing Ryosei about it when they were rushing toward their location back in the forest. From that memory, Shiro should have it in her right pocket, but Shiro’s unnerved attitude made him doubt that.

“A-Actually, when Onii-chan and Ryosei-san saved Shiro from the spears back then, Shiro returned to Onii-chan’s body in a panic, and she forgot that physical objects don’t stick to her when she does that…”

“Wait, so that means…”

Senkyo pieced together the information and his voice became tinted with a tone of excitement, the ends of his lips curving into a slight grin.

**201 – The Worst Poison**

“Yes, it was left back in the forest… Shiro is so—”

“OKAY! Well, that’s just unfortunate, isn’t it!?”

Senkyo suddenly patted Shiro on her left shoulder in a hearty tone which prevented her from apologizing any further. Although his words were suggesting he was worried about the situation, the jovial tone in his voice was telling a different story. This only struck Shiro with confusion.

“Oh wait, the last skeleton used a Traveler’s Gem too, right? What happened to that?”

He was talking about the opaque gem his enemy used to try and escape. It was a useless effort that ended with it losing its life, but it was impossible for them to forget the gem since it was the one that brought them here in the first place.

“That one got destroyed when Onii-chan killed the skeleton. Since it was still holding the gem that time, it flew out of the skeleton’s hands and smashed on the wall.”

“Ooh, I see… Man, we’re so unlucky, huh?”

His words may be saying one thing. But his tone betrayed his true intentions, as well as the smile forming on his face.

“O-Onii-chan? What are you planning?”

Senkyo quickly took a deep breath and calmed his mind before responding.

“I will find Hisho-chan and save her.”

He quickly turned his smug grin to a face with burning determination, reducing his earlier image to a mere afterthought. Shiro fell silent as she listened to him.

“I know for a fact that Hisho-chan was pierced through the heart. This may be a futile venture, but I won’t stop until I find her. I have a feeling that she is still out there, alive. So I will continue to resist fate and all logic until I find her or carry her dead body in my arms.”

After he finished vehemently declaring his oath, he turned to Shiro and awaited her response. She was staring intensely at the ground, dwelling on the right decisions to make. If she let Senkyo go, then he might get badly hurt just like last time or even worse, lose his life. On the other hand, she could not deny that she wanted to see Yuu again. Not only was she her first friend, but she also used herself to defend Senkyo. Taking notice of this, Senkyo left him with a few words of advice.

“Shiro, whether you approve of my actions or not doesn’t matter. I learned something while I was knocked out: do not hesitate. If I had only refused Freda-san’s offer to hear her prophecy, then I would not have realized my feelings and acted on Hisho-chan’s lies, restraining her before all of this happened. On the other hand, if I had continued to listen to her and her secrets of how to unlock my ‘true potential,’ then reaching my current goal would be much easier, but I did none of that and ran halfway into my decision. Even if your choice contradicts mine, I want you to follow through and walk down that path, as long as it’s the one you see right and with the least regrets no matter what happens.”

“Onii-chan… that isn’t fair…”

“…”

No matter how many times his words were repeated in her mind, all she could find were words laced with cruel bias and devious schemes spoken by a cunning fox that inputted calculations at every step. His words were giving her freedom, but that was only if it was taken at face value. In reality, Senkyo was using Shiro’s emotions against her. She had been sealed inside Senkyo for a long time and the magic that was able to do that had bound her will to Senkyo’s words. When Shiro was released for the first time, she was elated to hear that Senkyo wanted their relationship to return to what it once was as she was given the order of freedom. But now, he was trying to give her that freedom again, not so that she could be free to choose, but instead to remind her of the freedom he once gave her and the emotions that came with that.

In short, he was trying to bring her to his side by using guilt against her. He showed weakness, showed resolve, and gave her freedom, or rather, reminded her of the fact. Would she really have the power to go against his honest will? The will of the person she saw as an older brother and the person that gave her freedom from the seal within his body? After showing his resolve to fight and reminding her of his previous kindness, it became a herculean task to go against him without a pang of guilt assaulting her chest.

However, Shiro did not feel hurt, sad, or any of the sort. That was because there was more to his words. Why would Senkyo turn to an underhanded tactic to prevent her from going against his actions? It was simple. He needed her more than ever, so much so that he would use her own emotions against her. He could easily just order her to his side if he was that desperate, but although his words were carefully crafted to manipulate Shiro, he made them from the bottom of his heart and stained them with no lies.

As much as he wanted her aid, he wanted her to be free. Perhaps knowing that fact was what was making her lose strength in her arms and made her lips curve into a smile. This was probably all part of his calculations, but she couldn’t help but give in. Not if she knew that she was needed.

Manipulation using the hearts of both culprit and victim. The worst poison.

“Onii-chan…”

She softly muttered his name before gripping her cloak and flicking her head to face Senkyo, making the bell around her neck echo through the room.

“Shiro will do it! Shiro will support Onii-chan and save Yuu-chan!”

Senkyo gave her a smile after seeing the same determination in her eyes and prepared to walk on land different from Earth. He knew this was not going to be like the games he played and the stories he read. He considered death at every turn. Perhaps when they attempt to climb out of the ravine using magic, a large serpent would appear from the waters and attack them, or maybe a highly dangerous creature would be waiting for them the moment they leave. But just like how the various possibilities in his mind could be the next event in reality, the idea of saving Yuu was a future he never saw to be unreachable.

**202 – Departure**

“Alright! Then let’s take anything useful and get out of here. Shiro, where’s Kuro Yaiba?”

“It’s under the pile of bones in the backroom. Shiro put it there so it would be close to you.”

“Oh, I see. Although it’s a little messy, we should take this map with us too. Oh, and maybe these sickles could be useful too…”

As Senkyo was browsing through the cave for items to take with them, Shiro came to a realization that he was forgetting to consider someone else. The person that went out to explore this mysterious world for a way back home. Ryosei.

“W-Wait, Onii-chan! What about Ryosei-san? If we leave without him, it will be really hard to find him again.”

“That’s fine.”

“H-Huh!?”

For a second, Shiro thought Senkyo was just that desperate to find Yuu that he would leave Ryosei behind all by himself, the person against him meeting with her the most. But then she was reminded that he wasn’t that kind of person. Senkyo was desperate, but he would never put his friend in harm’s way. There must have been a deeper meaning she wasn’t getting. She trusted him that much. Noticing her confused gaze, Senkyo proceeded to explain.

“You said it yourself, right? We have 3 days at most before the enemy notices something’s off and comes here to check. If Ryosei hasn’t returned yet, then there’s a good chance he hasn’t found anything yet. There’s also a possibility that something is holding him back, but one thing’s for sure, there won’t be enough time for him to come back. Whether I am conscious or not, he probably assumed that we would leave this place before the last day. So going by that, the best move for us to do is to find safety away from this place.”

“Is that so…? Then did he not expect you to wake up? Ryosei-san is against Onii-chan meeting with Yuu-chan, right? Oh wait, maybe he didn’t think we would be doing this after he saw her…”

Shiro spoke gradually quieter as she realized what she was about to say in front of Senkyo. It was a bad move to remind him of that memory no matter what the case, but looking at him, he didn’t seem to be as affected as she initially thought and simply breathed a sigh.

“Perhaps. Perhaps that was the case, but maybe, just maybe, he learned to trust her after her stunt, even if just a little bit.”

The image of a hook piercing Yuu’s heart crossed Senkyo’s mind. At the time, Senkyo wasn’t able to sense it, but now that he tried to remember, he sensed worry and sadness come not from him, but from Ryosei. It’s possible he didn’t return to prioritize something even more important because he trusted whatever Senkyo’s decision would be, and most importantly, he trusted Yuu again even if only slightly.

“Okay, Shiro grab Kuro Yaiba and everything useful in the backroom. I’ll take care of the stuff in here.”

“Got it!”

Shiro responded and left to head deeper into the cave, but just before she did, Senkyo called out to her again.

“Oh wait, before you go, can you do me a favor?”

About 30 minutes later.

With Shiro in his arms, Senkyo hopped off the comfort of land and placed his foot in midair where it was caught by magic. Continuing his momentum, he jumped upwards repeatedly creating new air footholds to climb out of the land’s mouth. He took his last jump and lightly placed his foot on the soft dirt and grass. The wind blew against his slightly tattered shawl, revealing the lightweight armor strapped on his chest and shoulders, as well as the kunai and bony daggers that were hidden within the shawl’s cloth.

Fortunately or unfortunately, he also had the charm of protection that he always carried after receiving it from the Konjou Clan. He was thankful that he had it in the situation, but also realizing it was there made it heavy for his heart because it meant that he would have been fine even without Yuu’s intervention. But there was nothing that could be done about the past and he quickly put that thought aside with mixed feelings.

Another similar cloth was wrapped around his waist in order to suspend Kuro Yaiba to his person and the two bony sickles hidden behind his back. The night breeze was cold, but mostly because his head had lost the rest of his brown locks of protection.

“Brr! Being bald feels a bit weird, but it’s definitely better than having random patches of hair on my head. Oh, and now my hair will grow evenly! Maybe I should get a new hairstyle when it grows again. What do you think, Shiro?”

“Shiro thinks you look good in that, but it’s definitely still a bit new to her… More importantly, where do we go? We’re looking to find Yuu-chan, but Shiro does not know anything specific about Yuwokrn. Shiro was only ever in the village when she was a child and she was never curious about the outside world… sorry about that, Onii-chan…”

Shiro made a light bow with both of her hands firmly placed on each side, as well as her right arm. The vines suspending it were now absent and she was now back to its natural state.

“No need to apologize. Look, there’s a forest there in the distance. We’ll look for some food and water to take with us and look for a place with other people so we can stock up on resources and information.”

Senkyo took the map out of his shawl and pointed at the cross that they speculated they were.

“We have that map to start with, so we can check the other locations with crosses and see if Hisho-chan was sent to any of those. But going in blind will be suicide. There might be other enemies there, so first let's find a village and gather information about them. Those skeletons were pretty strong so maybe they’re well known.”

“As expected of Onii-chan! You always know what to do. Then, let’s go!”

Shiro cheerily walked to the forest alongside Senkyo. It was decided that she would only go back inside Senkyo’s body whenever their lives were in danger. Otherwise, Shiro will be helping Senkyo by telling him what she knew of the world and making his food with whatever she forages in the wild.

**203 – Yuwokrn Forest**

The two passed the night by trekking down the forest to get as far away as possible from the enemy’s hideout. They summoned a ball of light to aid their travels and exposed the mysterious beauty of a night in Zerid. They found familiar plants such as frunas and vino they discovered through Freda’s Eternal Paradise. But what they found in abundance, was the mystical undergrowth of plants that danced under the moonlight while others shrunk and hid underground when they were exposed to bright light, all under trees where their trunks twisted and turned to make their branches connect with other similar trees. There were also ones riddled with holes that released relaxing fumes that calmed the senses of those who passed it.

The wildlife was no different with tree-like birds with wings that attracted leaves and propelled their flight using them. One other notable animal they found was a one-eyed deer that carried mole-like creatures on its back. By the end of the night, Senkyo was thankful they didn’t encounter any hostile creatures and relished the sights he saw that no one could ever see on earth. It was about noon when they decided to take a break and tackle one of their major problems. Food.

“Hey, Shiro, what are we going to do about food?”

“Hm? Won’t these woxefi leaves do?”

Senkyo couldn’t hide his disgust as he twisted his face in a grimace when he heard the name of the leaves. Those were the leaves Shiro boiled back in the cave and fed to him. It left a sour taste in his mouth with a much less desirable aftertaste. Remembering that experience was enough to make his composure falter. Seeing this reaction slightly offended Shiro.

“That’s rude, Onii-chan! Woxefi leaves might have a strong taste but they’re tasty when you get used to them! We used to eat these all the time in our village.”

“So you’re saying it’s an acquired taste? What different is that from saying it actually tastes terrible?”

“Onii-chan! Fine, then Shiro will just have to feed you these until you like them.”

“W-Wait, no, please! I-I’m sorry, okay? It’s delicious if you get used to them but let's eat something else, okay? Please!?”

“Hrmm… Fine, Shiro forgives you.”

“Hahh… Thank god…”

Senkyo breathed a sigh of relief as he dodged Shiro’s wrath. He took a mental note to not make fun of her food palette when he still has no idea how to make food in Zerid by himself. While he was thinking that, he realized that he wasn’t as hungry as someone who was unconscious for four days. He shouldn’t have been able to swallow and there definitely wasn’t any medical equipment to feed him. With that in mind, he asked Shiro.

“While we’re at it, how did you feed me while I was unconscious? I didn’t feel hungry until now so you must’ve fed me right?”

“Oh, yes, Shiro did. She used magic to control your body to make you swallow food and water.”

“Wow, you can do that, huh? I guess that would go under… control magic, right?”

“Yes. But Shiro would not have been able to do that if Onii-chan didn’t order her to do as she pleased. Normally, familiars’ magic doesn’t work on their masters because they could easily turn on them.”

“I see. Then, good thing you’re Shiro. I trust you wholeheartedly.”

“O-Oh, well, Shiro thinks the same… B-But more importantly, Onii-chan, look!”

Trying to hide her embarrassment from Senkyo’s sudden compliment, Shiro changed the topic and pointed to a tree in the distance. It was a tree with soggy leaves that resembled kelp. Its long strings of leaves reached down to their waists and suspended only a few inches from the ground.

“This is an Atdrel tree. They grow near bodies of water and their leaves can be eaten raw. This should be enough to fill us up.”

Shiro turned to Senkyo but it didn’t seem like he was too interested and simply looked at it silently. In truth, he was just stifling his reactions to avoid offending her again. He was making the best poker face he could shape while bottling his true thoughts such as…

*\*This is actual food!? They just look like soggy kelp!\**

*\*Wait, could kelp be eaten raw again?\**

*\*Agh, either way, it doesn’t look appetizing at all!\**

*\*N-No, I have to force myself to eat it! If I reject this, who knows what she’ll do to me!\**

Calmly, or so it seems, Senkyo took a leaf from the tree and slowly placed it in his mouth. Shiro was concerned about why he was being oddly quiet the whole time, but she immediately brightened up when she saw his reaction.

“O-Oh! This is actually delicious!”

“Really!? That’s a relief… Shiro thought you didn’t like it.”

“Well, at first I didn’t. It just looks like soggy kelp after all. But it actually tastes sweet with a smooth texture. It’s kind of like candy.”

“Yep, that’s why Shiro likes it too! …Hm?”

While she was looking around, something caught her attention. It was a mushroom with a white stem and gills wearing a purple cap with white scales. She quickly made her way towards it and picked one to give to Senkyo.

“Onii-chan, here!”

She handed him the mushroom that was about the size of his palm.

“It’s called Sifij Mushrooms. They’re delicious too!”

“Huh!?”

He had an inkling of what it was going to be about. He just simply didn’t want to consider the possibility. In video games and RPGs this purple mushroom would be a poisonous one that constantly releases skull-shaped fumes indicating its lethal effects on the person. However, he had to remember that this is real life, just a completely different world. If Shiro, a local of this world, is telling him that this poison-looking mushroom is actually a delicious treat, then he at least had to entertain the idea. The atdrel leaves were also unexpectedly delicious despite their looks so he was hoping this to be the same case.

“S-So, do I just eat this raw?”

“No, you have to heat it up with fire magic. Make a ball of fire and place it inside its stem. Shiro has never tried heating it with normal fire, but depending on how powerful the fire is, you can make it taste like baked potatoes or drink it like potato cream soup! Weak fire makes baked ones and strong fire makes soup. Oh, be careful not to use anything too powerful or you’ll just end up burning it.”

“That so…? What are in these things anyway potatoes?”

“Shiro has no idea. All she knows is that they taste like potatoes and they’re delicious!”

Senkyo was slightly worried when she said she didn’t know what its contents were but then again, science might not exist in this world so she wouldn’t be at fault for not knowing. For now, he decided to follow Shiro’s instructions and tried to summon a ball of fire.

“…”

However, before he did, a memory flashed in his mind. A searing inferno filled his vision with red and orange, wrapping all over his body and singeing his skin to black leather. The next thing he knew, he was sweating profusely with the palm of his hand hovering under the mushroom’s stem.

“Y-You know what? Why don’t you show me how to do it, Shiro? I don’t quite understand how to do it.”

“Sure, that’s fine. Here, look closely, Onii-chan.”

Thankfully for Senkyo, she didn’t seem to suspect anything. It would’ve been bad to worry her in this situation. But one thing was clear to him, he caught a slight trauma from using magic. That was something he was going to have to get rid of if he wanted to survive in this world. He had Kuro Yaiba with him, but his skill was nowhere near Ryosei’s. While he was spacing out, a loud pop broke his train of thought and brought back his attention to reality.

“Here, it's done!”

Shiro handed the mushroom back to him. The mushroom looked the same but the only difference was its cap was slightly detached and it was producing smoke from under it. He took it off and found a white clump akin to mashed potatoes. Unlike what it initially looked like, the steam coming off of the mushroom along with the familiar potato-like scent made it look mouth-watering instead of ominously poisonous.

“Whoa! This looks great!”

“Right!? Come on, eat!”

Senkyo took a scoop using his finger and placed it in his mouth. A savory flavor assaulted his tastebuds and brought him the familiar taste of potatoes. The delectable aftertaste made him hum in delight.

“Wow, it actually tastes like baked potatoes…”

“Heh, Shiro told you so! Now here, it’s the soup variant.”

While Senkyo was busy eating the sifij mushroom Shiro first handed him, she grabbed another one and prepared him the potato cream soup version of the sifij mushroom. Without another word, he accepted the newly prepared sifij mushroom and drank it. It had a thick texture with a satisfyingly hot temperature to warm his stomach. In a matter of a few seconds, the mushroom was empty with no soup left inside it. At that moment, he made his decision.

“Shiro!”

“E-Eh?”

Senkyo suddenly grabbed her shoulders and made her release a sharp yell.

“Let’s pack a load of these things!”

“You sure are into this, huh, Onii-chan?”

“That’s right! I’ll take these soggy kelps and ominous purple mushrooms any time of the day over those boiled leaves!”

“Hrmm…”

Evidently, Shiro was quite unsatisfied with what he said.

“N-No, wait. I mean, these are really useful food that are small, delicious, and easy to carry. Let’s take these instead!”

“You know woxefi leaves are easier to carry, right? They’re just leaves after all.”

“M-My beloved little sister, Shiro. Surely you don’t plan on making food out of those when we still need a pot to boil them meanwhile these convenient items can be cooked as we walk, right?”

“Onii-chan.”

“Y-Yes!?”

“We’re taking all of them.”

“Affirmative!”

Realizing there was no saving his future self from the taste of “healthy” woxefi leaves, he cut his losses and followed Shiro’s command before the situation got any worse for him. They then foraged the area for as many atdrel leaves and sifij mushrooms they could carry inside the leftover sheets they took from the hideout.

**204 – Xeqrel**

Sometime later, Senkyo was entertaining himself by pondering various thoughts while he was picking sifij mushrooms. One of those thoughts included the atdrel trees. Shiro told him earlier that they grew near bodies of water, but no matter how far he looked, he didn’t see one in sight. Noticing this, he voiced his question to Shiro.

“Shiro, I thought these atdrel trees only grew near bodies of water but I don’t see anything.”

“Oh, that? Shiro thinks it must be a water pool underneath the area. Shiro’s kind can sense whenever water is nearby, but we cannot locate them exactly.”

“I see, that’s interesting.”

After foraging a complete patch of sifij mushrooms, he walked over to the next patch, but before he could even get close to it, he sunk into the ground and his whole body was submerged in water. He saw the thick greenery before him suddenly turn into a subaquatic environment. He panicked for a second, but upon realizing that his air was limited, he immediately calmed himself and assessed the situation.

As he craned his head upwards, he raised a brow in puzzlement as he saw that instead of the sky, a field of grass filled the space above him. He was sure he had sunk downwards into the water but was confused as to why he was still seeing grass and not dirt. The only place where the sky was true was directly above him from where he fell. The ground below him suddenly broke as if it were a thin sheet of ice atop a lake in winter.

As he searched for more clues, he felt something brush against his right arm. At first, it seemed like a patch of grass, but he was certain that was not the case when he saw it was shaped like a leaf. He grabbed it and bent it slightly, but instead of flexing softly, it made an arc much like how rubber would. He noticed that its stem was hollow and upon inspecting its base, he saw dirt stuck inside it. He poked the inside with his finger but before he could discover any more, he heard something heading towards him at high speeds.

He turned around to see a large underwater beast rushing at him with its mouth wide open ready to swallow him whole. Instinctively, he reached for Kuro Yaiba but he couldn’t pull it out due to the water around him. He tried to use magic instead but a distinct memory shut him down before he could even do so. His trauma prevented him from using magic. However, this was a life-and-death situation and Senkyo understood that. He needed to get over that experience right this second or else it would cost him his life.

Unfortunately for him, before he could even rebuild his mental state, he was already directly under the beast’s fangs. Before it completely closed, a blue veil wrapped around him, halting the approach of his impending doom. A barrier had been cast on him. It wasn’t his magic, so the only other possibility was Shiro. Confirming his simple deduction, he heard her savior chant a spell from above.

“O Water, I call for your headspring, the origin of life. Flow with my word to bring upon judgment to those who defile thee. Aqua Surge!”

A resounding burst entered his ears and the weight of the water around him disappeared. The next thing he knew, he was high up in the sky propelled by a large geyser. The beast lost its grip on the barrier due to the impact and gave distance between them. Now that Senkyo’s eyes were free from water, he caught a good look at the beast that made an attempt at his life.

It was a large salamander covered in a blue and green pattern with a length as long as the average lamppost. It had eight external gills circling its neck like a mane wriggling around as it tried to recover from Shiro’s magic. It was similar to the critically endangered axolotls that posed no threat to humans. They possessed the ability to regenerate almost every part of their body including hearts, brains, and lungs. If the creature in front of him had similar regenerative abilities, it would be very difficult to take it down.

The best possible move to make was to reduce it to ashes and annihilate it completely but such a thing was not possible with only Kuro Yaiba. He needed to use magic. He wouldn’t be able to end this battle without it. Despite thinking this, he could not discard the possibility that the beast didn’t possess that ability. He knew it was much easier to use magic, but he couldn't bring himself to use it.

Senkyo reached for Kuro Yaiba once more and positioned his legs to execute the enemy with continuous attacks using air footholds and flash strikes. Alas, due to his internal plague, he neglected to properly perceive his surroundings and failed to notice the axolotl beast’s external gills had all pointed themselves at him. Not a second later, water gushed out of their tips and released a powerful torrent of water. Meanwhile, unlike Senkyo, Shiro had noticed the axolotl beast’s intent and chanted a spell.

“O Wind, usher your gentle breeze and bring forth a draft, power of the gale. Herald your mystic breath once for conflict and twice for liberty. Zephyr!”

As the axolotl beast’s attack launched through the air, a ball of wind gathered beside Senkyo and exploded, sending him flying through the air and ultimately dodging the beast’s attack. Shiro’s gaze followed him through the air to summon wind magic to cushion his fall.

The sudden impact was strong but not enough to injure Senkyo. As he flew through the air, he desperately tried to lock his eyes back on the enemy and once he did, his face paled. The beast had lost interest in him and brought its focus on Shiro instead.

“Shiroo! Look out!!”

“…!”

**205 – Choice**

Shiro refused to take off his eyes on Senkyo but she didn’t ignore his warning and immediately cast a barrier on herself. The moment it was erected, a powerful force caused it to shake. Directly behind Shiro, the axolotl beast had its jaw wide open with its fangs driving into the barrier. A light updraft caught Senkyo and safely landed him on the ground. Now that was over, Shiro turned to the beast behind her, but not before its fangs finally pierced her only protection. The sound of shattering glass reverberated in her ear like an alarm and instinctively summoned multiple barriers to guard her. The beast’s fangs were able to pierce some of them, but not everything.

Just as she was about to start casting offensive magic, the beast roared and its fangs were coated in a dark flame. It took control of its external gills and wriggled them around in every direction. The next second, every filament on its external gills shot out high-pressure water that was enough to trim trees and some of the barriers guarding Shiro. Along with trying to penetrate her defenses, it created a wide dome of skin-peeling water sprays that protected the beast from any outside interference.

Meanwhile, Senkyo was behind a tree using it as cover from the high-pressure water dome. There was no time to waste. He had to make a move. Shiro was busy trying to maintain her defenses by restoring broken barriers, she had no time to chant for any sort of offensive magic. For the entire time, Senkyo had been leaving everything to Shiro. He was only a burden to her, doing absolutely nothing but being saved.

It was the same as before.

Yuu’s image flashed before his eyes. At that very moment, Shiro reminded him of her and the fact that he was completely useless. And the cause of his lack of action was his hesitation due to recent trauma.

Without even realizing it, he was about to repeat the same mistake he made. Uncertainty. Hesitation. Doubt. Indecisiveness. Such thoughts were filling his mind, preventing him to take action. It was all under a single effect. Trauma. But if he let his emotions take over, the only future waiting for him was more suffering from that same trauma. He had to decide. To make a choice and dedicate all his power to that choice.

Currently, he had Kuro Yaiba, two bone sickles, six bony daggers, and five kunai, all of which he could use to eliminate the beast using spirit power. He wouldn’t be able to kill it if the beast had a regeneration ability, but enough time to save Shiro and escape. Additionally, he wasn’t even sure it had those regenerative functions.

On the other hand, he could use magic with the spells Aqua Surge, Crown Spikes, Eruption, Knight Spell, Sun’s Protection, Hell’s Pillar, Needle Storm, Overgrowth, Purify, and Zephyr at his disposal. All of these were spells Yuu taught to Shiro, and in turn, taught to him by Shiro. Finally, after analyzing his skillset, he came to a decision.

*\*I’ll use magic. The only trauma I should be afraid of is when I watch my loved ones die while I stay a useless buffoon! Not again. Never again! I am not human! Bathing in a fiery hell or chopping my limbs a thousand times is much better than seeing them die!\**

“O Nature, bless me with your power, empower your children. Aid me in my plight and suppress my enemies. Overgrowth!”

Facing the axolotl beast, he stood true to his decision and recited the chant. The surrounding vines hurled at the beast with such speed that they managed to penetrate the high-pressure streams and tangled themselves around the beast. A normal cast of overgrowth usually wouldn’t have enough power to overpower them, but that just went to show how much mana Senkyo applied to them.

Stimulated by the growth effect of the spell more vines sprouted throughout the area and bound the beast even more. Not even a few seconds later, its external gills were completely covered in vines while its jaw was kept wide open as the vines continued to wrap around it.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

The air around Senkyo compressed and gathered to shape multiple needles, creating a wall of high-pressure air that could pierce through skin and bones. He dropped his arm and launched his attack, raining a volley of high-pressured air upon the beast’s suspended body. Each needle pierced and drilled into its skin, tossing bits of vines, skin, blood, and bones in its wake. Senkyo quickly used the opportunity to grab Shiro and took her away from the beast as well as his line of fire.

“O Fire, break free from your cage, exhibit your power. Scorch my path and bring upon a conflagration. Eruption!”

He stomped the ground with his right foot and caused two lines to appear on the ground, stretching forward with the axolotl beast’s remains inside the lines. The area between the lines then cracked and glowed an ominous red and orange. A second later, a wall of flame erupted from the ground and swallowed the remains of the beast with a scorching inferno so hot that not even ash would remain.

Senkyo stared into his creation. It was a similar sight from a few nights ago where he injured himself with his own magic. But unlike then, he was outside of the burning hell, using what once harmed him to save Shiro’s life. It was strange for him to see it like that. However, could he truly claim that he conquered his trauma without placing himself in the same situation as before? Most would say that this was more than enough, but Senkyo wasn’t satisfied. He was able to cast magic, but he was unsure that he could use its true potential without being able to walk through it.

Slowly, Senkyo raised his hand, gingerly placing it in front of the wall of flame, preparing to prove to himself that he was not afraid of pain if it meant saving his loved ones and surviving in this strange world. But before he could even do so, he felt something soft brush his back and wrap around him. Looking down to see what it was, he saw Shiro hugging him tightly from behind.

“Shiro is so glad Onii-chan is safe…! S-She was so worried… that Onii-chan would get hurt again…”

Senkyo was happy that Shiro felt that way, but at the same time, it was strange. That was because he felt this should be the other way around.

“No… that’s my line. I wasn’t in any danger. You were protecting me, after all. I’m sorry.”

“Huh? For what?”

Shiro met Senkyo’s gaze with upturned eyes.

“It took me way too long to make a move. If only I used magic earlier, you wouldn’t have been in that situation in the first place. I even shouted a warning at you instead of just shielding you with a barrier earlier. I’m sorry about that, really. I’ll do better next time.”

“You don’t really need to, though…”

“Nope, I do. If I have to fight through every battle with you almost dying, then I’ll actually seal you inside me until we’re back on earth.”

“W-What!? That’s unfair!”

“Exactly. That’s why I’ll do better next time, okay?”

“Ooh, okay! Then Shiro will do my best too!”

Shiro shot Senkyo with a bright smile as she responded, showing him just how happy she was that he cared for her so much. After that, he finally realized that the magic he cast was beginning to burn the forest. He made an awkward face as he noticed this and took out the fire with water magic before it all spread.

Then, a little bit after calming down the situation, a shout called out to them in the distance.

“Fit! Pqxui fiwodroag fia!?”

(Hey! What’s happening here!?)

**206 – Commander Iaksin**

Upon hearing the shout, Shiro immediately returned to Senkyo’s body before she was spotted. Senkyo turned to the voice and saw a man clad in leather equipment under a red robe appear over the hill beside them.

“Huh…? A… human?”

*“\*No, Onii-chan. They may look human, but they are locals of Zerid. Their kind are called Sorun. Much like Shiro, they have special abilities they gained from evolution. Unfortunately, there seem to be different kinds of Sorun, so Shiro does not know what abilities they possess.\*”*

*“\*I see… got it.\*”*

While Shiro was giving Senkyo the description of the person before him, the man slammed the ground as he crouched, summoning a multi-layered barrier. Not long after, more humans appeared on the hilltop. Two people wearing the same garments joined the side of the first man and began mumbling something with their hands pointed at Senkyo. Five more people appeared and lined up in front of them, three of which donned light armor equipped with a spear, a bow, and a katana, while the other two were clad in heavy armor readying a large warhammer and a shield. Finally, one last person revealed themselves, but instead of staying behind the protection of the barrier, he lead the group outside it and slowly approached Senkyo.

His weapon of choice was a greatsword which was resting on his shoulder plates. He was also clad in heavy armor but unlike the others, he rode on a strange dark horse with scales all over its body, a gleaming ultramarine tail and crest, as well as a rhinoceros horn glowing in the same ultramarine hue on its forehead. Most would define this creature as a unicorn, but its daunting aura made the description seem incorrect.

The small army followed behind the leader, their multi-layered barrier moving along with them. As the leader reached speaking distance with him, he took off his helmet and revealed his rugged face decorated by his short, brown hair and full beard.

“Lrxedrdr, pqxe oa tcz woajdr?”

(Traveler, what is your purpose?)

“U-Uhm…”

Senkyo didn’t know what to say to that, he was speaking in a different language, after all. Mixed with his intimidating presence, Senkyo’s brain failed to function properly. Fortunately for him, the voice of a goddess echoed in his head and saved him from his precarious situation.

*“\*Onii-chan, he asked why we’re here.\*”*

*“\*Oh, okay!\*”*

He opened his mouth and raised his finger.

“…”

And immediately closed it along with his finger.

*“\*Wait, what do I even say!? I don’t know how to speak that language!\*”*

*“\*U-Uhm, then, what do you want to say to him? Shiro will tell how what to say, Onii-chan just has to repeat it.\*”*

*“\*Ah, good idea! Then tell him that we were just passing by when that beast attacked us.\*”*

*“\*Okay! Then, repeat after me… Pqa yui wouioagt pqdr xe enxelr uiiiadrrel xelrhdr cz.\*”*

*“\*…P-Puwa yui uyoekuto pudurekuse… huh? What was it again?\*”*

*“\*O-Onii-chan you… N-No, never mind. It’s a new language so this is only natural. Shiro should be glad you pronounced one word correctly.\*”*

*“\*I-I did that bad!?\*”*

The disappointment was painfully clear in her voice. Although it was true that none of it was his fault seeing as the language and word pronunciation was completely different from Japanese but Senkyo couldn’t shake that disheartened feeling.

*“\*Okay, Shiro has another idea. What if Shiro controls Onii-chan’s body and speaks for him instead?\*”*

*“\*Ooh, that’s a great idea! …But how are you going to do that? You can’t control it like Ryosei, can you?\*”*

*“\*No, however, Shiro will use control magic instead! Usually, the spell requires a chant, but if the target consents and allows Shiro’s mana to take over, then she can do so at a moment’s notice!\*”*

*“\*Awesome! Then hurry and try it. This guy seems to be losing his patience.\*”*

*“\*On it!\*”*

The knight in front of him found it suspicious how long it was taking Senkyo to respond, so he was thinking of repeating himself with a bit more force, but before he could do so, Senkyo finally said something.

“Pqa yui wouioagt pqdr xe enxelr uiiiadrrel xelrhdr cz…”

(We were just passing by when a beast suddenly attacked us…)

The knight raised a brow at Senkyo.

“‘Pqa?’ Iiaiia tcz fims xe hsixeoakrn pqlr tcz?”

(“We?” Did you have a companion with you?)

“O-Oh, tui. Oa fiiia si vvsirelxe firel si iiavvxe lr.”

(O-Oh, yes. I had my familiar help me take it down.)

“Uidr…”

(I see…)

The knight seemed to be satisfied with the answer and put aside his suspicions.

“Lrdr, lroa enxelr pqxe iiaiia lr relbk?”

(Then, what did this beast look like?)

“Lr pqui reladr sikrnlra lrxe fiiia drlraxe grelui uisirela lr lrkrnxerelui xeiia vvdroarel siczfi lrxe hkrn xesiui uixerelpq pqjdr enaoaa.”

(It was a large monster that had external gills that looked like tentacles and a flexible mouth that can almost swallow barriers whole.)

“Hrmm…”

The knight took his eyes off Senkyo and shifted toward the location where the beast died. Following his gaze, Senkyo turned around and saw two other people in black cloaks inspecting the few chunks of the beast that flew around the area due to his needle storm. Both individuals responded to the knight’s gaze with a silent nod and disappeared into the trees.

“Tcz lrczfi uidr lrreloag, enlr pqt uih iiauiahoadr sigh czdr? Ja lrjwo hadr j vva uijlriia xeiia oasiiiaxedrt auijiiaiia pqoafi pqui firelvvrel, enlr pqcziialr jdr j lrj siiia-oaa uidrrel en drjg vva xe xeqrel?”

(You seem to be telling the truth, but why use such destructive magic? Our troop spotted a carpet of fire and responded immediately which was helpful, but wouldn’t one or two mid-tier spells be enough for a xeqrel?)

“Oa lrxe pqxe enxelr hreldr? Xejjoaui, oa lraxekrn j uisi iiauiatiia vvj si xelrjui. Enlr enxelr awoiia agkrnalrj fidr, oa lr aiiah lr xefiui j iiahiiaiia oa ui.”

(Is that what the beast is called? Apologies, I destroyed some of the terrain from my actions. But in case the beast had rapid regeneration, I decided to reduce it to ashes before it did so.)

“Ja? Ficzi, lrdr xet jv uia fims iiarnl?Iia tcz xeqrel oa krn oadr? Lrxedrdr, hcziia oa en…”

(Huh? They don’t have any of the sort, though? Do you have no idea what a xeqrel is? Traveler, could it be that…)

Senkyo’s heart dropped, fearing the knight thought of him as some kind of foreigner. He had no idea how these people treated people outside their country, much less someone from a completely different world. Just as he was formulating a plan to make a quick escape, the knight’s words halted him.

“…tfims sisiadr tcz relui xe pqrel?”

(…you’ve lost your memories as well?)

“Eh?”

**207 – Language Barrier**

It was completely different from what he was thinking, but he didn’t fail to take advantage of that misunderstanding.

“T-Tui!”

(Y-Yes!)

“Xejfia mshoa, ja? Lrxe drwoxekrn drdrtfikrn. Lrxedrdr, oa tcz pqui hreldrlr tcz lrjglr j uilrxeoakrn, Naen j lrpq vvrelj cz tcz hkrn. Tcz lraiia siui.”

(Another victim, huh? That explains everything. Traveler, if you wish to collect your thoughts on the situation, you can follow us back to the town of Naen. You must be tired.)

“Oa sih lrjendr krnlr, oa pqcziia en gxe.”

(If it isn’t much trouble, I would be glad to.)

“Msa pqrel.”

(Very well.)

The knight peeked over his shoulder and gave his troop a nod. Following that, the multi-layered barrier disappeared and they stepped aside for their leader to take the front. As he passed, the troop eyed Senkyo, signaling him with their gazes to follow behind their leader while they take the rear. Whether it was to guard him from possible danger or to keep a close eye on him in case he was hostile, Senkyo simply followed and began to ponder his future actions.

This was perfect for Senkyo. One of his major problems besides surviving in Zerid was interacting and socializing peacefully with its people. His main goal was to find and save Yuu, but as the otherworlder that he is, he had no means of tracking her by himself aside from a vague map. To that end, he needed to build relationships with the locals to gain trust and information to gather clues that will lead to her. By seeing one of the world’s settlements and how its people usually interact with each other, he would gain a good understanding of how to act toward others and how to use those relationships for his goals.

He planned to gain more information from the knight in front of him by feigning the victim of some sort of memory loss incident that seemed to be occurring. Since he already talked with him, the knight was the best person for the job. He also seemed to be a kind person seeing as he offered him an escort to the nearby town after coming to the assumption that he lost his memory. Although it didn’t sit right with him that he was taking advantage of his kindness, he would repeat this as many times as he needed if it meant saving Yuu.

Then, in the middle of their travel, he found even more reason to interrogate him as soon as possible. The heavily armored knight wielding a hammer called out to the leader.

“So, in the end, this extermination mission was a total dud, huh, Commander Iaksin?”

“No need to get worked up Ajdrha. I agree with the Duke that this was the safest decision. Let’s be thankful that there was only one xeqrel. A whole pack of those could have given us casualties.”

“You have a point but I really wanted to get some real action going!”

“You’ll have your chance, I’m sure. And before that time comes I hope you’ll keep yourself in top condition.”

“No problems here! I’m always ready to swing and squish!”

“Haha, you’re always so spirited.”

“!!!”

Hearing that conversation made Senkyo freeze, bringing his legs to a stop and fixing his shocked expression for everyone to see.

“Hm? Oa wojrelsi akrn oalr, Lrxedrdr”

(Hm? Is there something wrong, Traveler?)

“Y-You… spoke Japanese…”

The commander of the group that seemed to be named Iaksin stared at him in surprise. The rest of the troops stopped in their tracks to do the same. Perhaps because of shock, Senkyo spoke his mind before thinking of future repercussions. However, it was too late to change what he had done. All he could do now was see how the situation played out and act accordingly.

“Oh, so you can speak Japanese too? You’re a lucky one. I heard other victims forgot how to speak it which is quite unfortunate. Mostly because it has become more prevalent in the last few years.”

Thankfully for Senkyo, they were only shocked because he was supposedly a victim of memory loss that retained the ability to speak Japanese. It seemed the language didn’t mean anything more than simply being able to speak another language. The situation could have been worse like the language only being available to high-ranking individuals and a system that punished commoners that knew of it. Knowing this world was absent of such insane systems, Senkyo breathed a sigh of relief.

“U-Um! I’m sorry to impose this on you so suddenly, but could I please have a bit of your time later? Because of my memory loss, I’m still quite confused about this world, but I still remember someone important that I’m looking for. It would be a huge help if I could ask you some questions.”

“Oh, if that’s the case then I’d be happy to.”

“Really!? Thank you very much!”

Senkyo bowed to the knight as he showed his appreciation, and doing so seemed to have brought more questions to Iaksin’s mind.

“Are you from Nairn? Look, just like Fawxa over there.”

Senkyo’s gaze traced his finger and landed on the person behind him. She was a female warrior with short black hair wearing light armor keeping a katana to her waist. Her sharp glare met his gaze and released a not-so-friendly aura toward him.

“Ah, sorry about her. She may seem cold but she’s a caring one. But in case you don’t remember, Nairn is at the southwest of here on the other side of Uikakrn, so I was just wondering if you traveled all the way here just for the person you’re looking for.”

“S-Sorry, but I don’t quite remember that either. But what made you think I’m from Nairn?”

“It’s just that your mannerisms are the same as Fawxa. You also have a katana with you which is quite common in that region. But it seems your memories are certainly in a chaotic state since even your early years were affected, so I will save my own questions for later.”

“A-Ah, yes. I’ll do the same.”

“Alright then, let’s get back on track. It isn’t too far now.”

Senkyo and the troop picked up their slack and continued to fill the road with their rhythmic footsteps. He knew for a fact that he was in a different world, and with that being the case, it is only natural the species inhabiting it are also different. The people he was with were not humans, but instead a species called Sorun. But as far as he could tell, they were basically the same. Any human could live with Sorun and no one would be able to tell the difference. In addition to that, it seemed like the Japanese language was also commonly used. If that were the case, then there could also be a possibility of a Japanese person living among them, which means they could know of a way back to Earth. It wasn’t Senkyo’s main goal, but rather the next goal after finding Yuu. If he finds a way home, then he could plan his future actions around that since Yuu was likely in enemy territory. But before Senkyo could think any deeper, Shiro called out to him.

*“\*Onii-chan, you’re wrong there.\*”*

*“\*Hm? Where?\*”*

*“\*About a human being able to live within Soruns without sticking out. You see, we Zeldians have the power to detect mana in some way. Shiro can detect mana inside people through smell, meanwhile, Yuu-chan can detect exposed mana with sight but can only detect obstructed mana through her fangs. As for Soruns, they can sense any kind of mana, obstructed or not, using only their sight.\*”*

*“\*I see… then you’re saying that they’d be able to tell the difference between a Sorun and a human just by looking at them if they possess mana or not?\*”*

*“\*Yes, and the reason they are not questioning Onii-chan about that is because he possesses mana.\*”*

*“\*…Wait, but wouldn’t that mean that I’m actually just a Sorun?\*”*

Shiro paused for a second before continuing, giving serious thought to Senkyo’s question.

*“\*Shiro… is not sure. But if she had to guess, then no. Unlike Onii-chan, Sorun cannot use spirit power as he can. In truth, she does not know about what species Onii-chan is either, but what Shiro knows for certain is that Onii-chan is Shiro’s Onii-chan, and that fact will never change no matter what species he is!\*”*

*“\*Haha, thanks Shiro.\*”*

**208 – Town of Naen**

Time of what felt like 30 minutes passed and just as Senkyo finished building his questions for Iaksin, the horizon revealed a large town overflowing with medieval aesthetics with high watchtowers scattered across and overlooking the bustling town of wood and stone, houses built on timber frames, streets paved with solid cobblestone, all crawling up a hill that perched a large manor constructed with much more precision and size, its vicinity decorated with pleasant trees and artistic hedges.

The marvelous townscape was built across a large river with a long stone bridge connecting the two edges of land, and unlike scenes in fantasy stories, a stone wall was absent from the area, most likely because it was only a single town of a whole nation. Senkyo surmised that using manpower and resources on a single town was simply a waste, but the one reason that drove that fact was the existence of magic. Even if they had built walls against attackers, people of this world would simply use magic to overcome that obstacle. It is true that walls were not completely useless in this world as they would still fend off grounded troops, but it was certainly not effective to use limited resources on every settlement. Not to mention the existence of barriers. He did not know the limits of how large and powerful a barrier could be created, but if it had the power to cover and protect the whole town from multiple attacks, then that would be all the more reason to discard walls.

Senkyo and the troop crossed the bridge and entered the town. He spotted multiple knights guarding the bridge as well as the town with iron-clad individuals roaming the streets to complete their patrols. The side of the streets sprawled with its residents and vendors using cloths to shield their stores from undesirable weather or as a mat to place and present their precious goods. Meanwhile, those with more capital and much more specific merchandise marked their own stores with signboards presenting carved images of their wares such as swords and shields, hammers and nails, bows and arrows, pillows and moons, and finally, a signboard showing an image of some kind of food and beer was where Iaksin came to a stop.

“Alright, you all go on ahead. Ajdrha, take care of Oftir for me.”

Iaksin said so as he got off his horse and handed over its leash to the knight named Ajdrha.

“But Commander, what about the payment?”

“I’ll just pick it up after I’m done. I’d like to keep Oftir with me but you know what happens if I leave him alone in town.”

“I see, got it. Then we’ll be seeing you back at the manor.”

“Mm, take care of yourselves.”

The rest of the troops continued their march to the center of town where the large manor towered over everything. After seeing them off, Iaksin turned to face Senkyo.

“This is where we’ll be talking.”

“This is… a tavern, right?”

Senkyo followed his gaze and his fears came true. He was referring to the store making the most noise around the area with loud, hearty cheers and constant clanking of crockery signaling just how busy the business was. Iaksin noticed Senkyo’s face twist in perplexion, so he reassured him of one thing.

“Don’t worry. We won’t be talking in the dining area. The place will be much quieter and actually suited for talking.”

“O-Oh, I see. That’s good.”

Iaksin nodded in satisfaction and took the lead while Senkyo followed him from behind. Upon entering the tavern, he was immediately greeted by the customers, but unlike what Senkyo was expecting, they were not clad in any kind of armor nor were they donning tools of war. They were simple locals and laborers that you would see in the streets.

“Hey! It’s the commander!”

“How’ve ya been doin’ sir!”

“You’ve been busy all day how bout ya finally share a drink with us!”

“Haha, maybe next time, Risod. I’m still in the middle of something but keep that zest for when I do.”

“Aye, aye!”

Senkyo and Iaksin entered the door past the counter and traveled down the hall where they reached a door without the blaring noise of the tavern. When Iaksin opened the door, he revealed a large luxurious room with red patterned wallpaper, curtains of the same color with gold embroidery, multiple wall lamps, a chandelier, a large rug decorating the floor under a small round table of four chairs, a polished workbench and chair serving as a workplace with its numerous stacks of paper.

“Come, take a seat.”

Senkyo managed to contain his surprise and sat on the chair on the opposite side of the round table from Iaksin.

“I only have a single question so I’ll wait for you to finish. But first, let me introduce myself, I am Iaksin Krelag, one of the commanders of the Duke of Naen. Oh, and just to clarify, my given name is Iaksin while my family name is Krelag. Our way of introduction when it comes to names is the opposite of Nairn.”

“I see… then I am Senkyo Yukou. In respect to your customs, I introduced myself the same way as you did.”

“Haha, there’s no need to do that but I appreciate it. So, do you have your questions yet or are you still having a difficult time with your memories?”

Senkyo shook his head from side to side in denial as he answered Iaksin’s concern.

“No, I’m fine now. So first of all, do you know anything about three skeleton bounty hunters?”

“Skeletons, huh? If you’re looking for someone kidnapped by a bounty hunter, then here in Uikakrn, in most cases they will have a prison where they keep everyone they take. But unfortunately, I have no idea what it’s like when it comes to Sikrn bounty hunting since I’ve never left the country.”

“Sikrn?”

“Ah, they are the ones that live in the east. There are some anywhere in the continent but most of them live in Ridsikrn and Zelaoage. They’re called Sikrn because it means Mana Fairies. They have immense compatibility with mana, making not only their magic output much more powerful, but most of them can even use their own bodies to enhance with mana in some way.”

“So they’re the most powerful with mana, huh… Are vampires Sikrns too?”

“Yes. If you’re looking for vampires then they have a city of their own over at Ridsilkrn. Although, I don’t know exactly where… oh yeah, you can go to the library of the Border City Iqanlr. You should be able to find a detailed map there.”

“What’s a border city and where do I head to find it?”

“Let’s see… border cities are the cities we built across national borders as a sign of peace and unity with our neighboring countries. Half of the city is built on Uikakrn territory while the other is on the other country’s land. Luckily for you, Border City Iquanlr is the closest city that connects with Ridsikrn. All you need to do is leave the east exit and continue heading that way. Haha, funnily enough, that’s the way we came from.”

“W-What? You’re saying we walked in the complete opposite direction…? U-Ugh…”

“Cheer up. At the very least you met us so now you know exactly where to go.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right. Sorry about that. But while we’re at it, how can you tell which direction is which?”

“You forgot that too, huh? No wonder you’re lost. We have these things called Ailak stones. They look like this.”

**209 – Gathering Information**

Iaksin dug around his neck area, grabbed a string that was hanging around it, and took out a strange stone it was connected to. The stone seemed to have a rough texture, but upon inspecting it closer, the dark shades on the stone were actually natural tints and its true texture was incredibly polished and smooth as proven by the light reflecting on it through the window.

“This stone can tell you where the south is and navigate upon that. By applying some mana to it, it will begin to glow and vibrate.”

Just as Iaksin explained, the dark tint of the stone glowed in a mix of pink and purple light and shook erratically in between his fingers.

“Ailak stones are all connected to each other and they will try their best to maintain the connection with the largest throng of Ailak stones in the world. They got their name from this behavior meaning Resonate Link. The intensity of its vibration will depend on its distance to the south. When you place it farther to the south, it will increase its power. Meanwhile placing it closer to the south will decrease its power. The reason for this is because it’s using up the mana you applied to maintain its connection with Frxal Island, the southmost island of all of Zerid where the whole island is a giant rock of Ailak stone.”

“That’s interesting… where do you think I can buy one?”

“They only have these at high-end alchemist shops. If you have the money for it I can show you to one.”

“O-Oh, money, huh? W-Well, the thing is, I don’t have any money…”

“H-Huh?”

Iaksin’s face quickly turned pale, one filled with worry that he might have brought back a terrible memory or perhaps lost the memory of where he kept it along with the concern of his future, fundless plans.

“I-I see… sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t mind at all. For now, can I ask where you learned Japanese?”

“Yeah, this language has been taught in some schools ever since a thousand years ago. It's become common now but there are still some who don’t speak it so it's always best to use Zeldish when talking to new people.”

“Then are huma—”

Senkyo was about to ask if humans were the ones that appeared a thousand years ago that taught them the language, but he decided against it. The only questions that would answer were unrelated to his goals. He wanted to focus on Yuu, and learning unnecessary information may affect his actions. In fear of that, he cut himself off.

“Hm? Is there something wrong?”

“Ah, no, sorry. Then how about the beast that attacked us earlier? There seemed to be a trap made from… Arkage leaves I think it was?”

“Hm, that was quite unfortunate for you to encounter that creature in your state. You see, those beasts are called Xeqrel. The area you were in earlier was a common foraging spot for our locals which might’ve attracted it. Normally, anyone could’ve just taken out the xeqrel before we were even mobilized, but the problem lay in the existence of Arkage trees around the area. They can’t speak but have high intelligence. They used their external gills to pick some of the Arkage leaves to hide in the river where it often lives in. It can also dig its own pools and connect them through underground tunnels. If the xeqrel was in a pack, then I’m sure it wouldn’t have been such an easy battle.”

“Could you not have sent more fighters?”

“Unfortunately that wasn’t an option. Most of the Duke’s troops are away under the order of the main capital. Due to that, only my troop was available for commission.”

“Don’t you have an adventurer’s guild to recruit fighters or something like that?”

“Adventurer’s Guild? Haha.”

Iaksin lightly chuckled upon hearing the word.

“It seems those foreign books got to you before reality did, Sir Senkyo. It’s true that we have merchant and craftsman guilds, but an adventurer’s guild is long gone.”

“Why not? They would be good to have against those beasts right?”

“Indeed, if we had an adventurer’s guild now then our extermination mission wouldn’t have been so dangerous. However, hostile beasts rarely ever show themselves out in the open, especially near settlements because of The Great Unity March that happened a few hundred years ago. And even if they did, any ordinary citizen could defeat them with the right magic. There just won’t be enough demand for an adventurer’s guild, not to mention that killing any more than we already have would damage the ecosystem.”

“What’s the Great Unity March?”

“All factions of Yuwokrn gathered all their armies and divided them into five great armies led by the five Heroes of the time. The armies marched all over Yuwokrn to exterminate any beast that decided to become a threat to them.”

“H-Hmm? Isn’t that a bit too far? You know, extermination and everything.”

“Is that so? Well, it wasn’t like the armies killed on sight. You see, most of the beasts here are intelligent as much as they are dangerous. Most beasts agreed to stay away from large groups of people, especially when it came to settlements. Meanwhile, the beasts that ignored our warnings were killed and those who managed to escape retreated to Sunken Nests. Ah, if you don’t know what those are, they are the dens of typically hostile beasts that plague our caves and caverns. Since underground caves were too extensive and were no place to march an army into, the beasts were left alive, but instead, the entrance to those caves became guarded.”

“I see. Having something like that happen would certainly reduce any need for an adventurer’s guild. Not to mention if civilians are as capable as you say, then gathering jobs would certainly be on the low side.”

**210 – Iaksin’s Concern**

“That’s right. If you’re looking for something similar, then you should check out settlements with Sunken Nests. They usually have a place called Haeqras. It’s a recent organization made by one of the Heroes 27 years ago. But despite their fresh formation, they’re already keeping up with long-established businesses, placing branches in every settlement with Sunken Nests. Perhaps that’s the influence of a Hero for you.”

“Oh, really? What do they do?”

“They take in anyone interested and train them to dive into Sunken Nests. Before Haequras, merchants and nobles usually commission knights to collect materials in Sunken Nests. But those requests were rarely accepted due to the intricacy of a Sunken Nest. No nest is ever the same, some of them require troops specialized in fighting in tight spaces or ones that are able to navigate through steep terrain. In short, it was no place for knights with strict formations and low adaptability to enter. There are some exceptions, but getting commissioned became excessive which was too much to ask their lord and the interest in Sunken Nest soon died down.”

“I see… then I take it Haeqras trains their people differently depending on the Sunken Nest?”

“Ooh, you’re really perceptive, Sir Senkyo. Yes, the people Haeqras trains are called Crawlers. They have a rule where Crawlers must first pass an aptitude test before being able to be commissioned by employers. They make sure the Crawler has the ability to handle themselves in the Sunken Nest. This rule is especially strict when it comes to escort jobs since it isn’t only their lives at stake but also the people they are escorting.”

“Crawlers, huh?”

Hearing the term, he couldn’t help but think that it was named after the term dungeon crawling. Whatever Sunken Nests were, they sounded similar to dungeons you’d find in fantasy games back on Earth. And he was right.

“Funnily enough, it seemed like the Hero who started Haequras was discontent with the lack of an adventurer’s guild and tried to erect one, but as we thought, it was a dud. So, he compromised and created Haeqras instead. I remember a rumor that said its name was derived from another language in their world that meant ‘high class’ and that it was a perfect fit that in our language it meant ‘crawler’ which reminded him about a term in their world called dungeon crawlers. It is certainly an excellent form of symbolism that connects our world with his! I’m sure the effort he dedicated to making something as simple as a name delivered his passion to the people and made it succeed even more! I was so moved!”

“A-Ahaha…”

Senkyo couldn’t help but internally cringe at that explanation. He couldn’t bring himself to tell Iaksin, who gave heated praise to the name, that the Hero simply took an already existing game term and translated it, which conveniently sounded like a fancy foreign word. Whoever that hero was, Senkyo already had a good grasp of his personality. Wanting to move the conversation, he commented on something else.

“But still, these must’ve been some smart monsters if they knew to back down against the Great Unity March.”

“That’s true. Actually, most of the monsters that backed down have gained the ability to talk and created their own settlements all over Yuwokrn. Some of them have entered political agreements with some leaders.”

“That really is amazing!”

“I know, right? I even met one myself. Oh, before we lose track, is that all you wanted to ask?”

“Ah, only one last question. What’s causing all of these memory loss incidents?”

Iaksin paused for a second and stroked his beard in thought, most likely thinking about their whole conversation as he said the following words.

“You truly are a peculiar one, Sir Senkyo. You’d think that would be your first question.”

“A-Ah, yeah, I guess I am. Well, that’s just how important the person I’m looking for is.”

“I am glad to be of service to your cause. And as to answer your question, a monster we’ve never seen before broke out of the main capital’s sunken nest. One that possessed incredible speed, wings that tear the sky, and the power to devour the memories of its victims. I haven’t actually been able to see it with my own eyes, but that’s what I’ve heard. Seeing as it assaulted you before you arrived here, it must be close by. I will report this to the Duke to prepare the appropriate defenses later. You should be careful too, Sir Senkyo. There’s a good chance you will encounter it again if you head back east.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

Senkyo felt a sense of guilt brewing inside him seeing as he’s instilled false fear in Iaksin. In reality, Senkyo was only pretending to be a victim of that to be able to ask him these questions without arousing suspicion. Unfortunately, he was going to have to live with this guilt, at the very least, until he finds Yuu.

“Mm, if that is all, then may I ask my question?”

“Ah, sure. If it’s something I remember that is.”

“Then, do you remember the father of your glassmetal blade? If not, then maybe the place you acquired it from?”

“Glassmetal blade…?”

Senkyo followed Iaksin’s finger and found that he was referring to Kuro Yaiba.

“O-Oh, this? Actually, it isn’t even mine. It’s my friend’s sword. We lost each other when traveling here so I was just keeping it until I found him again. I apologize but I do not know this blade’s smith.”

“Is that so? That’s unfortunate. The moment I saw it I immediately knew it was crafted by a most talented blacksmith. I was hoping to have a sword birthed by them but it looks like I’ll have to hold that thought.”

“You must really have an eye for swords then if you knew that from just seeing the scabbard, Iaksin-san.”

“‘Iaksin-san?’ Ah, see, you are from Nairn. They’re the only ones with that custom.”

“Oh, that’s… interesting.”

“Well, going back to the topic, it doesn’t take someone with a keen eye to know its value. You see, glassmetal is hailed for its beauty but it is also the most fragile metal in existence, so much so that its strength is commonly compared to glass. But despite that, the genius who crafted that blade not only managed to create a sword but as well as a scabbard for it, all out of glassmetal.”

“H-Hm? R-Really…?”

Senkyo couldn’t help but be dumbfounded. Iaksin is calling Kuro Yaiba, the sword that aided both him and Ryosei through multiple battles of life and death, cutting both flesh and armor with lethal strokes that sliced through them like butter, the most fragile metal in this world.

He didn’t want to believe it, but he couldn’t help but be unnerved. He never truly thought of who exactly made Kuro Yaiba and where it came from. He had no idea how the blade worked and so did Ryosei, but if what Iaksin was saying is true, then it was dangerous to expose the blade to any sort of danger. It made Senkyo anxious that someone from Zerid immediately recognized the blade while no one on Earth could.

“What are your plans now, Sir Senkyo?”

“Hmm… I think I’ll continue my travel.”

“But it will be nighttime by you leave town wouldn’t it?”

“That may be so, but I have no money. Besides, even if I did, I have no time to waste. We got ourselves some food from the forest earlier so we’ll just find shelter on the way.”

“I truly admire that determination. Sir Senkyo, before you leave, could you wait for me at the east exit? I want to give you the payment I’ll be receiving from my commission.”

“W-What!? Are you sure!?”

“Hm? Won’t you take it?”

“W-Well, it would help me greatly so I’d be happy to, but it’s your reward right?”

“Nonsense. I did nothing. It was you who took out the beast, not us. I cannot speak for my subordinates, but if anyone should be receiving the reward, it would be you.”

“T-That’s… Thank you very much for your kindness.”

“This is nothing. With that settled, we should go now before it gets dark.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

**211 – Jester of Naen**

Iaksin and Senkyo left the tavern and agreed to meet at the east exit. Since it would take him a while to even get to the manor on foot, Senkyo decided to walk around town for a bit. He saw the townspeople hustling and bustling, working their everyday lives using their own skills to make them stand out over everyone else. It was an unusual sight for him to see unlike when he was simply living his life and going to school back on Earth. Just as he was thinking that, some of those people that were using their skills were certainly standing out more than any other person on the street. A large crowd had gathered in a circle, curious about what it was, Senkyo went to check.

As Senkyo weaved through the throng of people, he found a jester juggling six rings making them flow like waves in the air with such speed and precision that he was able to sustain that for a long time. He then threw the rings high into the air and spun around exaggeratedly as he managed to weave his arm through every ring that fell down and caught them.

He handed the rings to one of his two assistants while the other handed him five balls and began juggling again. As he formed a perfect circle with the five balls, he passed one to his foot, tossed that ball through the ring of balls he was juggling, and caught it with his face. He then followed it up by passing another ball to his foot, but instead of repeating the same move, he jerked his forehead, bouncing the ball on top of it, tossed the ball on his foot to the other foot, and continued his performance. The crowd cheered in amazement as they watched the jester juggle a ball with his head, three with his hands, and one with his feet as he alternated the ball from one foot to another, keeping his balance all the while.

He carefully caught all the balls and froze their motion without letting any of them touch the ground and tossed the balls to his assistant. He then raised both of his hands up in the air and entered a one-hand front walkover, carrying all his body weight with one hand as he flipped his whole body, similar to a backflip without becoming airborne, but instead of landing the flip, he stopped his legs’ advancement in the air and purposefully fell on his bottom. The spectators laughed as they gullibly believed he failed his trick. The jester looked around in confusion as he did so but quickly rebounded by shifting to a back walkover where he stretched his whole body backward and smoothly flipped it to land gracefully on his feet. The crowd cheered once more as the jester bowed signaling the end of that performance.

“Thank you, all! Now, for my next act, I will perform a magic trick for you all to see, but this kind of magic will be manaless! Do we have any volunteers!?”

The crowd searched amongst themselves in an attempt to find the person who was not their own that would continue the performance, however, not a single hand was raised. Noticing the lack of participation of his spectators, the jester took it upon himself to continue the act.

“Very well! As you all have seen, I have not moved from this spot, nor have any of you seen any mana exit or enter my body! Now, can the owner of this item please step forward!”

The jester then took off his hat, revealing his silver hair, and obstructed the crowd’s view of his mouth. With his head craned backward to align his mouth with his esophagus, he took off the hat to reveal a sword with a black hilt, a blade that possessed a familiar red stroke was sticking out of his mouth. The crowd cheered in awe while Senkyo panicked as he saw Kuro Yaiba was missing from its scabbard.

“Hahaha, thank you, thank you!”

“Hey! Give that back!”

As the jester entertained his audience, Senkyo stepped up to intervene and take back his sword, but before he could do so, the jester hurriedly made distance between them.

“Oh, yes, but please wait a moment.”

The jester cleaned Kuro Yaiba with a cloth he had in his pockets and presented it to everyone.

“Do any of you know what this is? It is a marvelous sword crafted only by the most capable of blacksmiths made from the most beautiful metal of all, Grudr, also known as glassmetal!”

“Glassmetal?? Then that thing’s useless! It’ll break the moment it touches anything! Haha!”

“Keep that thing for display before someone robs it for money!”

“Txe! Krn glr hlr tcz pqkrndr iiaiialr!”

(Yeah! No wonder you didn’t get cut!)

The crowd denounced Kuro Yaiba, making Senkyo closer to snapping. But before he did, the jester spoke up.

“Yes, yes! But wait! Do any of you know of the great heroes of 27 years ago!?”

“Huh? What about them?”

“Ah! Weren’t there two heroes that had glassmetal katanas?”

“Txe, oa fiui aglr lroabk!”

(Yeah, I think he’s right!)

Hearing the subject of heroes froze Senkyo. If what the audience was saying was true, then he had already laid eyes on the glassmetal swords they were speaking of. One in his memories, painted in white and blue, while the other was right in front of him being handled by the jester.

“Correct! Iordr!”

The crowd stared at the jester in confusion about what he said. It was quite evident that whatever that was, they had no knowledge of it.

“In the realm of the manaless, this metal has a different name, Iordr, meaning spirit metal! Besides its overwhelming beauty, this metal possesses the power to house spirits!”

“Actually??”

“No way!”

“Axeoat lr glr enh!”

(Get back to reality!)

It was clear his audience didn’t believe him, but the jester continued regardless.

“Reality or fantasy, which one would you be compelled to believe in this world? In the ambiguous line between the two, depending on the power of the spirit housing it, the blade can turn from its dull, fragile self into a completely different blade that cuts through anything possessing such might that it would be deemed unbreakable! Quite an interesting story is it not? Would you let yourself be chained by the cruel reality or believe in the thought of attainable fantasy!? As for me…”

The joker quickly spun around exaggeratedly and revealed himself to the crowd.

“…I believe in the art of clown!”

His face was covered behind glasses with giant blue eyebrows, a blue mustache, and a large red nose. The audience was pleased with his performance as they laughed at his appearance.

“That marks the end of our performance! Thank you all for coming!”

Most of the crowd whined rebelliously, but deep inside, they were quite satisfied and left the area. After he closed his performance, the jester walked up to Senkyo.

“I, too, hope that your sword will find that fantasy. But I do suggest that you refrain from using it. The moment the sword breaks, there’s no bringing it back no matter how powerful the fantasy. I bid thee farewell!”

The jester hurried back to his assistants and escaped through a dark alleyway.

“Wait a second! Give me back my sword!”

Senkyo chased after them, but as he turned the corner, he saw that the alleyway was a dead end but the jester and his assistants were nowhere to be seen. He quickly turned his head up and saw one of the assistants’ capes disappear over the roof. He thought of chasing them down, but just as he was about to jump upwards, he felt something shake by his hip. When he checked what it was, he saw it was Kuro Yaiba’s hilt. Much like how the jester took his sword, he placed it back without him even noticing.

As he stopped to ponder the jester’s actions, he realized it was almost time for his meeting with Iaksin. Not wanting to inconvenience the person kind enough to fund his ventures, he let the jester go and headed for the east exit.

When he arrived, he looked around but saw no sign of him. Just as he feared he miscalculated the time, a voice called out to him from behind.

“Ah, Sir Senkyo! Sorry for taking so long.”

“O-Oh, no not at all. To be honest, I thought I was late.”

“Hahaha! Good to know you were enjoying the town so much. Here, three bags of gold and silver hjor.”

Iaksin handed Senkyo three heavy bags that chimed as he moved around.

“T-Three bags!? Wait, hjor is the currency, right?”

“That is correct. It was only supposed to be one bag, but some of my subordinates thought you could use them better, so here.”

“This is… Thank you all so much! Please, could you relay the message to your subordinates?”

Senkyo bowed his head in appreciation for Iaksin’s kindness.

“Of course, any time.”

“Seriously! Thank you so much! Oh, could this be enough to buy one of the ailak stones you showed me?”

“Hmm, no. You’ll need two more of those bags if you want at least one.”

“H-Huh!? Wait, why is it so expensive!? Didn’t you say there’s a whole island of those things? Shouldn’t that mean it’s a common resource?”

“Well, that would be the case if the island wasn’t always active. See, unlike any other place in Zerid, the southern areas have the largest amount of natural mana in the environment. Due to that abundance, the island’s ailak stones are always active. I didn’t tell you this earlier, but when you penetrate an active ailak stone, it will explode. So, in short, that resource is unobtainable, leaving us with the ailak stones we find underground.”

“I-I see… that’s unfortunate, but asking for more is simply out of the question. Oh…”

Senkyo’s eyes laid on Kuro Yaiba. From this day alone, Iaksin, the jester, and even the crowd from earlier told him that his blade was actually a fragile piece. He recalled one of the jester’s parting words basically telling him Kuro Yaiba had lost its strength. If that was the case, then there was only one reason that could have happened, and that was the absence of Ryosei.

In the first place, Senkyo isn’t the wielder of Kuro Yaiba. He had experiences of using it himself, but Ryosei was always inside his body. Then, he remembered that Ryosei had the power to call Kuro Yaiba whenever he was in the spirit realm. If everything the jester said was true, then the spirit residing inside Kuro Yaiba was gone, and instead, it was by Ryosei’s side at that very moment.

“Iaksin-san, I’m sorry to trouble you any further, but could you please show me to a weapon shop?”

“Mm, sure. I don’t mind.”

“Thank you so much!”

**Chapter 2:**

**212 – A Search for Earth**

*\*Slash! Slash!\**

“Graaaaaah!!”

A powerful roar echoed through an inky world scintillated by the crystal-like grass and trees of the forest. There stood a lone figure clad in a black coat with what seemed to be a large mutated bear slowly disintegrating into ashes behind it. The loud scream was the mutated bear’s last call for help before being taken away by the wind in the form of little particles along with its life.

“19626/25000…”

The figure that slew the mutated bear spoke with a defeated air to its voice as it read out the numbers it saw only through its eyes.

“Right now, I’m a revenant. A whole three levels away from visitant… We can’t get back to Earth this way; it’ll take way too long.”

It was Ryosei, looking displeased as he returned Kuro Yaiba to its sheath. He was contemplating the path he chose after being trapped in a completely different world. About three days ago when they first arrived in Zerid, he immediately set out to search for a way to return home after confirming Senkyo’s stable condition.

His first course of action was to travel in a single direction to find civilization and ask around who might know a way to travel through worlds, however, that plan completely fell apart the moment he found himself in the middle of the forest at dusk of his third day. By placing landmarks on his trail to prevent him from getting lost, he traveled in this direction without stopping, and being the sleepless and untiring spirit that he is, he did exactly just that.

Despite this, his efforts were fruitless as it was his time to return to the hideout before they reached their first week in Zerid. According to his theory, the people that arranged Senkyo’s kidnapping will be expecting him by then. If they have some sort of transportation method or allies in the nearby area, then it was most likely for hostiles to appear in the hideout by the end of the week. Before that time, Ryosei had to return to the hideout and get as far away as possible, hoping that Senkyo would have regained consciousness by then.

As it was the third day, he had four days remaining. He realized he was cutting it close as unexpected interference may appear and slow him down on his way back, especially since every second he was late was another second lost for their escape.

“To think that even my backup plan would turn out badly… this situation really isn’t great.”

Ryosei decided to travel in the spirit world instead of in the real world as it consumed less energy and allowed him to fight the local spirits and take their spirit power. In the event that he found nothing by the end of the third day, he was hoping that it was enough time for him to get closer to the spirit level of visitant and send them back to earth by himself by using its powers to cross worlds. Unfortunately, it seemed like killing hostile spirits didn’t give him as much spirit power to level up, bringing two of his plans down on the very same day.

“This is bad. Not only did I find nothing, but knowing Senkyo, if he wakes up without anyone to stop him… after that happened, there's a good chance he’ll leave to look for Hisho-chan.”

Ryosei thought back to the moment Yuu blocked the skeleton’s hook from reaching Senkyo. Even before she saved him, Senkyo was blinded by love to the point where he tried to persuade her to stop despite him being the target of her kidnapping. But now that Yuu showed that she valued Senkyo by sacrificing her own life, these two actions didn’t connect. Why would anyone kidnap a person who they valued enough to use their life to save them? Was it just because they had an incredibly valuable role in some kind of scheme, or is it something else entirely? Right now, no one knew the answer to that, and Ryosei feared that the moment Senkyo realized this, he would go out and search for her.

However, what bothered Ryosei here was his decision. Before he left the hideout to find a way back to earth, he felt like deep inside, he knew this was what Senkyo would do. Then why did he even leave in the first place for a plan that had no guarantee of success? Would it not have been wiser to stay back and guard Senkyo rather than separate from him? In the first place, his actions were based on a completely unreliable theory with endless loopholes patched up by baseless assumptions. If that theory was wrong, then it wouldn’t be strange for an enemy to return to that hideout. And in Ryosei’s absence, Senkyo’s life would be in the most danger.

*\*Why did I even leave?\**

It was the leading question that was running through Ryosei’s head at the moment.

“I should’ve planned this out better… Hm?”

As he seemed to be bothered by his inability to create well-thought plans, he heard a tune in the distance.

“Is that… a flute?”

Ryosei’s eyes lit up in expectation. If there was a flute being played, then someone had to be operating it. This was his final chance to find a clue on how to escape Zerid. He hurriedly but quietly made his way to the origin of the string of harmony. Through the thick of the forest revealed a young girl blowing on the flute by the river. Her emerald hair was fixed in a bob cut with a white dress over her body. The melody she played had managed to relax his mental state, which allowed him to notice an important detail. She was a spirit. Specifically, one of the four spirits he noticed nearby.

He shifted his gaze from the young girl towards a rustling bush. Two individuals exited the bush on opposite sides and returned to the forest’s cloak as they hid behind different bushes and trees. It seemed like they were trying to surround the area around this young girl. He didn’t quite understand what their relationship with her was, but after catching a glimpse of their rugged faces plastered with wide smiles of greed, it didn’t seem like they were bearing any good intentions.

As of this moment, Ryosei didn’t have enough knowledge about their abilities. If he wanted to protect the young girl from their attack, then being right beside her was the best move. However, just before Ryosei stepped out of the bush, a thought came to mind.

*\*Is this really the right decision?\**

Just a few moments ago, Ryosei came to the realization of just how dangerous it was to leave Senkyo alone. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision without concern for other possible outcomes. Just like this one, what would happen if Ryosei decided to protect this girl? His current goal was to find a way back to earth. To that end, would it be more effective if he gained the trust of a little child by saving them or the trust of the assailants by helping them catch the child?

“…”

A cold chill ran down his spine upon noticing the terrible thought that crossed his mind. Why would he consider assisting people in committing an evil deed? Was this what it meant to think objectively? Ryosei never encountered such a problem in his time alive. It was a world that was always black and white. Hunters kill spirits attacking humans and spare spirits that mind their own business. Evil spirits were impossible to reason with, making it a meaningless action to do so. But now that he was facing a conflict between normal spirits—the beings that he thought of as either enemies or neutral bystanders—would that justify the sacrifice of this one spirit? A terrifying thought indeed.

*\*Whoosh!\**

Before Ryosei could even arrange his thoughts, the three spirits jumped out of their hiding places and charged at the young girl. In the hands of the individuals were a knife, gun, and mace. At that moment, there was no time to think. Ryosei disregarded all his thoughts and let his body take control. Rather than choosing the correct choice, he opted for the action he felt was best. With that in mind, he quickly swooped in and drew three clean strokes with Kuro Yaiba. The path of his blade traced the weapons of each of the three assailants. If they were spirited souls, those locations would house their cores. The staggered expressions that were spread between the three were cleanly wiped out as they disappeared into nothing but ashes, confirming that they were spirited souls and clearing the area of any other spirits.

**213 – Spirit Girl**

“…”

Ryosei turned to the young girl suspiciously. Although it had been a quick scuffle, it still created a loud enough noise to take someone else’s notice. At the very least, the final gasps of the three should have been loud enough to reach the girl’s ears and warn her of the danger. Despite this, she continued her tune, uncaring of the events that took place directly behind her. Although he saved her life, it didn’t seem like he would be appreciated for it.

Ryosei couldn’t care less about gratitude but at the very least he wanted information on how to return back to earth, and maybe if possible, the reason for the target behind her back that those three spirits were after. He thought of making loud footsteps toward her and grabbing her shoulder to take her notice, but before he could do that, the girl stopped playing, slowly turned around, and bowed her head to Ryosei.

“Tha-Thank you for saving me from those three strange men!”

The young girl directed her appreciation towards Ryosei with moist eyes that were more than ready to cry. Taken aback by this sudden development, Ryosei took a step back to assess the situation. Contrary to his first impression of her being oblivious, it seemed like the truth was the complete opposite. This girl was so perspective of her surroundings that she knew that he was the one that took down the people that were after her life.

Indeed, there was noise to indicate people present, but not enough to tell the number of assailants and most definitely not something that would suggest that Ryosei, who was holding a sharp murder weapon of his own, was the one that warded them off.

“I-I thought I was going to die! Thank you, um… Mister Cool Guy!”

*\*This kid is too carefree for her own good,\** were the thoughts that filled Ryosei’s head. Even though she knew she was in a precarious situation, she just stood by and waited for him to save her and rewarded him with unnerving cheeriness. But just as he was about to be thrown into confusion again, he got a grip on himself and reminded himself of his objectives.

“Uhh, sure. But enough of that, do you know a way to get to a place called Earth? It’s a completely different worl—”

“Yes, I do!”

“Ah, good. Then… wait, you do!?”

Another surprise. He didn’t expect a child to know about something that seemed very complicated such as traveling through worlds. But what bothered him the most was although he was able to successfully ask the core message, the young girl didn’t even begin to think about why he was asking such a thing. She answered him instantaneously as if she was expecting it. Was this just the level of perception this girl had? Ryosei found that very hard to believe, but for some reason, he couldn’t throw away the possibility. After all…

“Hehehe! I bet you’re confused, aren’t you, Mister Cool Guy. You’re wary of me, but also curious. You’re even thanking yourself that you didn’t sell me off to those three strangers. You see… I am also a Cool Lady!~”

Cringe. It was the first word that passed through Ryosei’s mind. Not only did she wear a smug face, but also puffed out her chest and pointed to herself in a grandiose manner, exemplifying her self-importance. For a girl who was about to burst into tears a few seconds ago, she must have quite the heavy mood swings.

Leaving aside her cocky attitude, she was right about everything she just claimed. While an excuse of high perception might explain how she could read his current emotions, there was no possible way for her to know that Ryosei was weighing down his options of either saving the girl or giving her to the assailants.

“Ah, now you’re really, REALLY curious now, aren’t you!? How did I know all of that, you ask? Well, my services aren’t for cheap. You want me to tell you what I can do and how to get to Earth, right? I’ll do it, but first, I need you to promise me something.”

“…and that is?”

Her words reminded Ryosei of your typical scam artist. But strangely enough, he found her words a little convincing. He wondered if it was only because he had no choice in the matter.

“Do you know ‘The Garden?’ I want you to take me there!”

“‘The Garden…?’ Sorry, but if you couldn’t tell, I’m a spirited soul. I don’t know what’s common knowledge in this world.”

“You’re… not lying. U-Umm… well, you don’t have to worry about that. I’m a capable cool lady. You just have to be my bodyguard until we get there. Although I’m a cool lady, those people are too much for me to handle. I promise that if you get me to The Garden, I can get you back to Earth. So, how about it? Please?”

She was, in fact, capable of what she was saying and was willing to keep her end of the bargain if Ryosei did what she asked. What told him this was his ability to detect lies. The ability that let him see through any fabric of untruth, no matter how little information or how cleverly crafted those lies were. Now that he was using such an ability, it gave him a hunch.

“Sure. But how long is this going to take? I don’t have that much time on my hands…”

“U-Umm… M-Maybe a few hours…?”

It was already the third day since Ryosei left Senkyo. He only had half a day to spare to get back to him in time. Going any further would be crossing the line. He’d be relying on Shiro to leave the hideout or hoping that the enemy didn’t have a way to immediately send units to check the area for Senkyo to be safe. On top of all of this, was the inevitable effort Ryosei would have to make to find the other two. Even if Senkyo and Shiro either escape or get caught, Ryosei would have to search for them in order to bring them back to Earth.

Normally, he would just go back and get Senkyo first, but that meant convincing the girl and hoping that they haven’t already left, but above all, he couldn’t guarantee the safety of this method. The girl may not be lying about telling him how to get back to Earth, but the problem was the girl herself. For some reason, she had a bounty on her head that guarantees many enemies of unknown skill along the way. Bringing an unconscious person on a journey filled with blood-hungry assassins was a questionable choice at best.

Ultimately, Ryosei was left with two choices. To abandon Senkyo and leave his well-being to fate, or to drop his only lead on how to get back to Earth. At first glance, it was obvious that he should just go back for Senkyo. Since the whole reason he went out to find a way back to Earth was to safely get Senkyo there, abandoning him would make this action completely meaningless. He’d be putting the cart before the horse. However, he wasn’t just dropping a lead. He would also be sacrificing the girl in front of him. It is clear to him that if he leaves, then this girl will have no way to defend herself and die to her pursuers. The frightened look on her face right this moment was proof of that. It seems he was right.

“…”

Just as he was about to open his mouth to deliver his merciless decision, he stopped himself. For some reason, he couldn’t be satisfied with this. So much so that his mind was a complete mess. But in hindsight, wasn’t his mind already a mess before he left the cave? For some reason, he chose the option that left Senkyo the most vulnerable. He wouldn’t have normally done that. Unable to go any further, he decided to take a step back and arrange his thoughts.

**214 – Chaotic Mind**

This girl could read his mind, or at least something similar to that effect. Her last words to him were a lie. She was trying to cover up the true length of the journey, or at the very least, was uncertain of it when she realized the possibility of her getting left behind if the journey was over Ryosei’s time constraints. She purposefully made that whole show to look reliable earlier and prevent him from realizing the offer’s cons, convincing him that escorting her would be in his best interests. It seemed like this girl was actually somewhat capable. It was simply unfortunate for her that Ryosei wasn’t the kind of person to lose sight of his objectives.

The thought of bringing her with him back to the hideout crossed his mind, but that would defeat his purpose of protecting Senkyo if he brought back a huge target behind his back. This girl and Senkyo cannot meet, and choosing one over the other would put the other in great danger. This was a difficult choice, as the person he would neglect would most likely die.

There was only one aspect that broke this stalemate. Looking at the situation objectively, Ryosei had no reason to be saving a random spirit girl he just met. The logical choice was to return to Senkyo. He wanted to make the right decision this time. Then logically, Senkyo was the right decision. It had to be. After all, that was how Ryosei operated all this time when he was alive.

Whenever in battles and life-or-death situations, he would always opt for the most logical decision. What was so different about before and now? Ryosei wasn’t sure, but there were probably many factors that changed, but if he had to point a finger to fault something for his current mental anguish would be…

*“\*You are not human.\*”*

Ryosei’s thoughts lead to Senkyo’s anxiety about being a non-human. It seemed like Senkyo’s troubles had so much effect on him that it even haunted him after the person himself was relieved of this anxiety. For Senkyo, it turned out that he was only worried about what Yuu thought of him, but then why did it stick to Ryosei. The question floated around his head.

For starters, Ryosei was most definitely no longer human. He is a spirited soul that revived his consciousness after encountering Senkyo. Why would he care if he was still defined as human or not? He didn’t have a special person like Senkyo did that he would care about appearances at this point in time. After introducing himself as a spirited soul to his loved ones, they treated him no less than usual. In fact, they might have even gotten closer.

Being human or not is meaningless to him. Having come to that conclusion, Ryosei chose to change perspectives. He figured if it wasn’t the classification of being human, then perhaps it was something more… internal. The concept of being human. What differentiates humans and animals would be their intellect, in a deeper meaning, it would be something connected to their emotions—morals. The idea of what is right or wrong. A complex subject that varies from person to person.

If it were this, it would make sense that leaving a little girl to die to assassins when you could have done something would wound one’s morals. That would also explain why he hated himself after even considering the idea of handing a little girl to dangerous men in exchange for information. It all made sense. But that meant that he had been deviating from his previous system of thought. Whether this change was a good one or not was yet to be determined. What he did know, though, was that it was similar to Senkyo’s, which he first looked down on as naïve and idiotic.

After all, who in their right mind would chase after a girl that betrayed them and tried to kidnap them to another world? It was incomprehensible. Beyond logic. However, it was that same system of thought that proved Ryosei wrong time and time again. In times when Ryosei would just stop and say it was meaningless, Senkyo forged himself a path to take on those situations. For a second, Ryosei felt good about this change. But that begs the question, when and how did this change happen? As Ryosei was deep in thought, a voice called out to him and brought him back to reality.

“U-Uhm… so… are you coming with me?”

The girl in front of him asked meekly, a drastic change from the pompous act before. She was being careful not to get on Ryosei’s bad side, most likely because she wanted to have Ryosei on board in protecting her, but after his internal struggle, she was no longer confident. She had a hard time maintaining eye contact, her voice was soft, the light in her eyes slowly darkened, frowned lips being bitten from the inside to maintain composure and handle anxiety. She didn’t want to disturb the long silence so as to not anger him, but got pressured by trepidation. Her fear was apparent.

“That’s… a good question.”

Would it truly sit right with Ryosei to leave this defenseless girl to fend for herself against her pursuers? No, it would not. Then would he be fine if he abandoned Senkyo? It was a question he couldn’t immediately answer. If he left Senkyo, it would definitely make it hard for him, however, he is not incapable. If he wakes up with Ryosei absent, he felt there was a good chance he would leave immediately to look for Yuu. Even if he was still unconscious, he knew Shiro would do everything to protect Senkyo and perhaps even leave early. If it's those two, they might just be able to handle themselves, and it would simply be Ryosei being overprotective of Senkyo.

“Haaah……”

Ryosei let out a deep sigh, making the girl stiffen as straight as a stick as she realized he had come to a decision. Her face was pale from anxiety but wasn’t sweating one bit. Probably because she was a spirit, not human. Ryosei had a defeated look along with his response.

“Fine, I’ll go.”

Those three words resonated inside the girl and brightened her up, making her mental state turn a complete 180, bringing cheer and life back into her eyes.

“Really!? Really, really, REALLY!? You’ll go right!? You said you’d go! I heard it no doubt about it am I wrong!?”

Her cheery side might be back but the anxiety seemed to linger as she asked for confirmation.

“Yes, I decided to go with you. Now that that’s been established let's get a move on before I change my mind.”

“Uhuh! Okay, okay, sure, let’s go, Mr. Cool Bro! Over here, follow me! I’ll explain everything you need to know here on the way, so rest assured you’re in safe hands!”

“M-Mr. Cool Bro…? No, no, no, just call me Ryosei. Please.”

“Do you not like it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Okay! Then I’ll call you Ryocchei!”

“R-Ryo—huh?? No, please. Dial it down with the cutesy names already. I’m begging you.”

Dissatisfied, she bubbled her cheeks and stared sharply at Ryosei. But even so, she managed to convince herself that it was best to back down and compromised.

“…Then, Ryo-chan. Is that fine?”

“Hahh, you know what, fine. Let’s just go.”

“Yeeey! Then let’s go!”

The girl excitedly tugged on Ryosei’s hand, trying to drag him along with her to who knows where.

**215 - Chouka**

The girl’s name is Chouka. She is the daughter of the head of The Garden. Apparently, her mother tends to be on the overprotective side. She always has a barrier around their home to keep outsiders away and to make sure no deviants like Chouka wander off on her own and get into trouble.

Hearing that she had a mother piqued Ryosei’s interest. Apparently, true spirits have the ability to construct altars which creates true spirits of the same species. By supplying the altar with the spirit power of their kind, it will eventually give birth to another spirit. Mixing in the spirit power of a different species disrupts the process and resets the progress for that spirit.

While that was the case, Chouka’s mother was not a true spirit, but a spirited soul. Unlike true spirit who are born in the Spirit Realm, spirited souls were simply lost souls of other worlds that were sent to this world because of certain circumstances. They were not given any ability to reproduce or create spirits of their kind. However, Chouka’s mother was different.

She claimed that in the beginning, Chouka was not yet a spirit. She was a wisp. They were the spirit equivalent of a familiar. Summoned from the caster’s own spirit power, wisps have no consciousness or individuality. They are simply there to serve and follow their caster’s will. They are mostly used for reconnaissance, confusing enemies with multiple signatures of spirit power, and generally being an extension of the caster’s being.

She had memories of those times, although they were vague. But Chouka’s mother would always treat them like her actual children. She would talk to them despite their unresponsiveness and praise them whenever they succeeded in completing a mission she sent them to.

Time passed with their lives like that and came the moment everything changed. Chouka’s mother was chosen to be a Di Manes. The Hero equivalent of the spirits. Being bestowed with great power, not only her mother but as well as the wisps she controlled, Chouka and her siblings, were strengthened. It was then that Chouka and the others gained a conscious. They could listen to others and respond to them with their own thoughts.

Although that was the case, they were still too limited and weak to be called spirits, but it was a step in the right direction. Their lives became even more livelier after that. Her mother was elated by her children’s evolution and had them interact with other beings to build up their own individuality. As they were given that mission, Chouka became close with another Di Manes named Yuuki. She talked about how her interactions with Yuuki were one of the best things that happened in her life and how much fun she had. But then, her eyes dropped slightly and her face took a solemn look for half a second. Ryosei didn’t miss that. Something must have happened with Yuuki, but he didn’t pursue the subject.

From there, Chouka’s detailed stories became vague, clearly trying to avoid certain memories. It seemed like there was a certain incident that triggered everything, but she didn’t clarify it. However, she did mention that Yuuki entrusted a portion of his spirit power to Chouka and another sibling. Doing so empowered them greatly. The next thing they knew, soul fragments of the Di Manes became one with Chouka and her brother’s souls, completely turning them into spirits.

That power was the one she used to break out of her mother’s barrier and got herself stuck in such a precarious situation. She didn’t know why she was being targeted, but if it had to be anything, then it would be the soul fragment that merged with her. It was a tremendous power source that birthed spirits. Seeing as she had nothing else on her it was the most likely target. Incidentally, that was also the power she used to read Ryosei’s mind.

Apparently, it had to do with her flute, but she didn’t specify. Well, that was fine since Ryosei was still a kind of stranger to her who was only hired to be a bodyguard. Spreading word about one’s own powers to strangers was a stupid act. It seemed like Chouka knew this. Ryosei’s evaluation of her would have gone up a significant amount if it weren’t for the strain she was putting on her face as she declined to tell him everything. She clearly wanted to boast about it. Well, the way she talked about herself already sounded like she was boasting so at this point it was natural.

*\*A Di Manes, huh?\**

Ryosei felt this was a perfect opportunity to ask about the questions he had in mind. If it’s a Di Manes, then they might know something about the reason for Senkyo’s strange powers and maybe even something about himself since he was something like a spirited soul, but also not. And if it’s them, then they might know something about his other concern…

*\*If it’s a person with that much power, I wonder if they’ll be able to cure Yukai-chan’s mother…\**

**216 – Enny**

“We’re here! Enny, are you here?”

Chouka stopped in front of a cliffside. At first, it seems like there was nothing here, but a trained eye for different kinds of presences dictates that they have entered a completely different territory from before. He noticed this a few minutes ago, almost as if the land they were stepping on was all a part of a single spirit. He was a bit worried, but Chouka walked right in without worry. Noticing my concern, she told him that this was simply the entrance to the True Spirit World, and it is maintained by someone she calls Enny. He didn’t let that cutesy name deceive his senses. Seeing as how carefree she was despite being ambushed by others that were after her life, he was sure she could slap a cute name on a pool of ominous slime at the drop of a hat.

He was right.

“Oh? Chouka, what brings you back so early? I was sure you’d be out for another day or two.”

“Hey…”

“Shh! Enny, Shhh!!”

While Chouka was busy silencing any more information that would suggest that she brought this trouble upon herself, Ryosei observed the one she called “Enny.” It wasn’t just a non-person, it was a single mouth that appeared out of the cliffside, lips with a rough texture that could be mistaken for rocks, teeth as large as your average person, a tongue shaped like a snake’s, slithering as it spoke, and its whole figure outlined with dark shadows. He was reminded again that this was the spirit world, a world where sights like this were most likely the norm. But still, he didn’t understand his employer’s sense for cutesy names.

“…A-Anyway, Enny, could you send us back home? I need to talk with Mommy about something. There were these strange guys following me around, you see. So… s-so, I’m going to warn her about them and guard the others!”

It was clear to anyone that she was only acting tough, but the small amount of time Ryosei had spent with her told him clearly that she was filled with pride. Although he didn’t know if it was good for her or not, it was certainly the cause of her outgoing attitude. At least she meant no malice with it.

“Haha, okay, Chouka. Do your best guarding those siblings of yours. As their reliable big sister, you have to be there for them.”

“Y-Yes! I’ll be the best reliable big sister in the world!”

Chouka’s eyes lit up at the phrase “reliable big sister.” Her eyes filled with fire as she heavily gestured her excitement. It seemed like Ryosei was going to finish his duty earlier than he thought. There was even a slight chance he could get back to Senkyo. But then, Enny’s tone turned heavy.

“But you see… There seems to be a problem with the Spirit Realm today. I’m not sure I can accurately send you to The Garden. We’re still investigating the problem, so maybe if you waited a few days it’ll turn back to normal and I can send you back safely.”

“What!? D-Days!? But that’s…”

Chouka was conflicted. Normally, she wouldn’t mind waiting days to return, but it seemed like she wanted to report the danger she discovered to her family as soon as possible. It must’ve been her fixation on being a reliable big sister. Then, she turned to Ryosei.

“Hey, Ryo-chan. I think we should still go. What do you think?”

Surprisingly, she wasn’t forceful about her decision and was looking for his insights. He thought he’d just be dragged along this whole trip but she knew the importance of others’ opinions. She had been giving herself her own restraints every now and then, being careful not to overdo it. Wherever she was getting her pride from, it wasn’t all for show.

“I think we’ll be fine if we go now. If something happens I’ll just do my job. That’s what I’m here for, right?”

“R-Really!? Hooray!”

Ryosei decided to indulge Chouka. Although he wasn’t sure if this was the right decision, it was one he was fine with. Besides, if all went right, he’d be able to get back to Senkyo. Maybe.

“Well then, if you don’t mind, I’ll be sending you two now.”

“Okay!”

“Please.”

The two gave their last responses as a pitch-black circle with ripples of purple appeared below them. Arms then began to rise from the circle, gripped the two tightly, and dragged them into the darkness.

“W-What the—This is…!”

A memory flashed in Ryosei’s head. It was the time when Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki were first dragged into the spirit realm. In front of the school gates, these exact arms attacked Itsuki along with Senkyo and Yuu as collateral after trying to save him.

Sensing Ryosei’s panic, Chouka reassured him.

“You don’t need to be afraid, Ryo-chan. These are Enny’s powers. It’ll send us straight back home in no time!”

“I-Is that so…?”

Ryosei checked for lies and none showed up. It seemed like she truly trusted Enny with this. He turned his head to the large mouth to make sure of it himself.

“Will this be dangerous for us?”

“Of course! You’re safe in my hands. Literally, hahaha! I’ll try my best to send you to The Garden, so rest assured.”

Ryosei still couldn’t get used to seeing this mouth talking to him like that, much less if it began telling terrible jokes like that. But other than that, he felt no malice and seemed to be telling the truth. He had a difficult expression on his face but decided to go along with them. From here on, whatever happens, happens.

**217 – The Entity and the Looming Spider**

The shadow expanded and consumed Ryosei and Chouka whole. The pool of darkness then shrunk to nothingness as if it never existed. Silence returned to the empty cliffside. Then, a single voice disturbed that silence.

“Did you actually send them to Hiroto’s place?”

It sounded like it belonged to a woman. There was no one to one there, but they were clearly talking to Enny.

“Why should I be the one to report to you? You have units on the scene, why not ask them?”

“Fufu, you got me there.”

The voice was playful. Almost like it never expected Enny to answer in the first place. It was just trying to mess with her.

“Why don’t you just show yourself, Control Leader of END?”

“My, my! How delightful it is to be summoned by a Divine Beast!”

Thin lines of distorted space appeared from above. A haze that was shaped like a spider web slowly stretched downwards. A thin line protruded from the formation and came the owner of the voice.

A being that could fit the description of woman-spider better than spider-woman descended from above. The lower portion of her body was that of a spider. A large frame with multiple legs to support its weight. Meanwhile, her upper portion was a woman with spider-like features. Long and sharp fangs with fingers of similar lethality. Six red eyes plastered on her face with deadly gazes that looked like they were hunting for prey. And fine, long filaments that covered her body, exchanging human clothes for animal hair. It was half woman and half spider.

“A pleasure to meet you.”

The spider licked her lips as she said that, staring at Enny. The whole time she was here, she had been looking at Enny like she was prey.

“How imprudent. Do you think you can get away without consequence?”

“Of course, I can! Divine Beast that you are, you cannot take action other than maintaining the Spirit Realm. You are incapable of violence. That fact was true even in the face of your master’s murder!”

“Enough of this!”

Enny’s voice boomed so loud that the surrounding trees trembled and even the ground began to rumble.

“If you’ve come only to provoke me, then I’ll just send you away myself!”

A large pool of darkness appeared beneath the spider, the arms that rose from it grabbed her and tried to consume her. But before they could, the thread connecting her to the spider web above tensed and stopped her from completely going away.

“Oops. My apologies. I may have gone a bit too far with that one. More importantly, I do have actual business with you. I’m sure you would have the heart to listen to me after helping you bring the boy here. It took me quite a while to make him leave the other boy behind and go with that girl.”

“Unfortunately for you, I know all about your plans. The moment you take control of Yukou Senkyo, you’re hoping to take Konjou Ryosei as collateral using their unusual connection. So now, you’re trying to strengthen the two to ensure that they become chosen to be the next ambassadors. There is nothing for me to repay.”

“My, my. As expected of the Divine Beast. Having eyes and ears in all three worlds sure is convenient. Oh, how lucky we were to have found you early. Then again, things would have gone for the worst if you hadn’t sent those kids to the Spirit Realm when you did. For the both of us.”

“Utterly disgusting. To that end, you sacrificed one of your leaders and sent innocent hunters to their deaths. It is hard to understand such methods.”

“Well, for me, it is you who is hard to understand. Despite being a transcendent being, you still possess needless emotion. If only you had thrown those away, then perhaps we would actually be troubled by this development.”

“My master was a benevolent ruler. Discarding the gifts given to a being is a foolish act.”

“I knew I wouldn’t be able to understand you. It is simply frustrating that someone like you achieved transcendence. My magic doesn’t work on you and you even bypassed the truth detection of those kids. Such wasted potential.”

“I, too, knew this was a waste of time.”

The arms that wrapped the spider pulled harder. The heavy aura they released thickened.

“Ah, you wouldn’t want to do that. I’m sure you know, but the reason Konjou Ryosei died was because of me. Having to do that another time is a simple task. He is not essential to us, just a large bonus. But to you, he is different. An essential unit that can be added to the Spirit Realm’s powers. If you cross us here, well… I’m sure I don’t need to clarify what happens next.”

The arms loosened slightly. Having seen the successful results of her threat, her lips twisted into a cruel smile.

“That’s what I thought. Well, I’m sure you already have an inkling about my request with you. Seeing the positive results of our little scheme today, we would like you to cooperate with us to strengthen Yukou Senkyo and Konjou Ryosei until the day of judgment comes. From thereon… the early bird gets the worm, I guess. Hahaha!”

“Such arrogance. What makes you think you’ll be able to take control of those two?”

“‘The commander of tranquility he is, devoid of corruption he is not,’ as the prophecy says. Our master is a bit obsessed with that passage. I’m sure the both of us know what that line pertains to.”

“Yukou Senkyo’s leash, huh? And knowing you have that option, you brazenly waltz up to me and request an alliance?”

“Oh, my. Is it perhaps that the one they call ‘The Entity’ has no power to counteract such methods?”

“You misunderstand, I was questioning whether you actually have a chance of taking hold of them.”

“My, such confidence. Then please, accept our proposal and prove me wrong. It will make for a cute struggle.”

“Very well. Although incapable of violence, I will make you regret challenging me to a battle of wits.”

In a blink of an eye, sharp threads swung down and the dark arms rooting the spider were severed. She ascended to her spider web and hung on one of its threads upside down as it replied to Enny.

“Then I, Vilane The Control Leader, will happily dance with you.”

**218 – Destination**

A place devoid of light. Moments after being swallowed by the pool of darkness, Ryosei’s vision was taken from him, allowing him to see nothing but darkness. He can speak, he can smell, he can hear, he can feel, but he cannot see. Just as he was about to call out to the person that should be beside him, a small light appeared below their confines of darkness. It quickly took up most of his vision until he was forced to close his eyes and protect them from the bright light.

“Th-This is…”

A voice reached his ears as he tried to recover from his blindness. It was Chouka. It seemed like she was reacting to something. If that was the case, then it should be okay to open his eyes again and see what was happening, too. Ryosei thought and slowly opened his eyes. His vision was blurry, his head was dizzy, and a sharp pang of pain assaulted his body, making him stagger. Realizing he wasn’t going to get anywhere if he forced himself, he stood still and focused on recovery.

A few seconds passed and everything slowly subsided until his senses were all back to normal. His blurry vision slowly focused on the structure in front of him. It was a strange sight. A large ball was floating inside a tube of spirit power. It seemed like the flow of energy was coming from both the floor and the ceiling, intersecting with the ball between them.

Looking at it closely, it wasn’t just intersecting with the ball. It was being absorbed in it. The ball was a bit hazy but more opaque than the flow of spirit power entering it. If Ryosei wasn’t mistaken, then this ball was also made up of spirit power and the purpose of the tube was to strengthen it.

He walked up closer to it and scrutinized it carefully. He walked around it a few times to discern the structure and then caught a small figure from within the ball. Within the ball was what seemed to be some kind of nucleus. It had thicker spirit power than any place in the whole structure, almost like the core of a spirit. Within that core was an outline of some kind. The thick accumulation of spirit power was making it hard to see, but it wasn’t impossible. It wasn’t symmetrical and the edges he could recognize had a rough texture. If he had to describe it, then he would compare it to a fragment of broken glass.

He tried to think of what the structure was supposed to be, but then a voice called out to him.

“U-Uhmm… Ryo-chan?”

It was Chouka. He was so focused on the structure that he forgot to talk with her first.

“Oh, sorry I got distracted. What is it?”

Chouka looked down at the floor with clouded eyes, but then she suddenly shook her head vigorously and faced Ryosei. Turning the anxiety in her eyes into determination.

“This isn’t home.”

“It’s not, huh…”

After hearing Enny’s warnings he figured they wouldn’t be sent to the right place. But if Enny meant to send them to The Garden, then maybe the margin of error was small and The Garden was close by. Well, that’s just positive thinking at work. Worst case scenario, they were at the farthest place from The Garden possible. But since they chose to take this route then there was no use griping to the past. Ryosei explained that to Chouka, but despite being in a possibly desperate situation, the determination in her eyes didn’t falter.

“Then, we should get out of here as soon as possible! This large, glowy thing isn’t something anyone would have. We better not get involved to get back home faster.”

“That makes sense, but where do we go?”

“To Enny! When we arrive, we’ll just have to wait until she’s feeling better again. Then, we go home!”

“Enny? Didn’t we just leave her? Do you know a way to get back there?”

“No, we’ll ask the closest Enny!”

“The closest…? What?”

Noticing Ryosei’s confusion, Chouka explains.

“You see, Enny is in charge of managing the Spirit Realm. There are many of her all over the Spirit Realm. She can send anyone to any place in this world. If she tries hard, she can even send us to different worlds. She’s an amazing person! We can just trace her power to find her.”

Ryosei nodded understandingly. It seemed like this Enny is not just one person, she is an existence that has enough power to be tasked with the Spirit Realm’s maintenance. If she can manage a whole world, then it isn’t any surprise that there is more than one of her. A thought crossed Ryosei’s mind.

“Then I can just ask her to send me back to Earth?”

“Ah!? Th-That’s—!”

Chouka’s expression filled with panic. When she was boasting all about Enny’s existence, she leaked that Enny was the key for Ryosei to get back home. As long as he gets to her, there would be no need for Chouka. Realizing her mistake, she gestures frantically trying to give him reasons not to leave her. They were all weak excuses, but she threw them at him nonetheless.

She might be a child but she’s quite capable. Though capable, she’s still a child. No one would think that a child like her would be able to think properly in this situation and construct a feasible plan to get out of their predicament. She has the skills and traits of a capable leader.

On the contrary, she has no experience in using any of those. She can make simple mistakes just as easily as he can solve problems. Just like now, she leaked the only information that Ryosei was after. With no binding force left on him, he can just leave Chouka behind and focus on fixing his own problems. That route would be easier and much more efficient for him.

Ryosei could see why she always escaped from home. If she doesn’t get experience, then the skills and traits she cultivated will rot. He only voiced her mistake to make her aware of it, Ryosei could easily apologize and end this conversation as a simple prank, but how will that serve her experience? Harsh as it is, if Chouka’s mistakes aren’t punished, she won’t grow. To that end, he opened his mouth.

“Sorry, but none of those excuses really worry me. I’ll just take my leave here and go. Too bad, huh?”

“N-No! W-Wait!”

“What? Do you have more to say?”

“I… I…”

Just as Ryosei turned his back to her, Chouka quickly restrained his arm. Panicking, she spoke in wordless stutters. Before, she always looked Ryosei straight in the eyes while talking, but now her eyes were all over the place, from the ground, to the walls, to the strange structure. She was thinking of ways to bind Ryosei to her again. Beyond this room, she knew not of the dangers that lay ahead. She needed Ryosei’s power to escape. If she loses him now, there was a good chance she won’t make it back home.

The long silence continued. Ryosei placed one foot further from Chouka. The message was clear. Take any longer, and she will lose him. Agitated, distressed, frenzied, crazed, fraught, it wasn’t the mental state someone wanted to be in to be able to solve a problem as fast as possible. Seeing this, Ryosei decided to give her a little push.

“This is getting annoying. If all you’re going to do is squirm in place then I’m out. Reliable big sister? Don’t make me laugh. Like anyone that can’t do anything but panic will be reliable.”

Ryosei’s words struck a nerve in Chouka. At first, she looked furious, but then she looked downwards to the ground. Unlike before, she was still. He couldn’t see her face. Was she crying? He was criticizing Senkyo for making a lot of girls cry but it looks like he wasn’t any better.

As he had that thought, Chouka suddenly headbutted his chest with her full weight, knocking both of them down to the ground. She quickly straddled his chest to keep him from escaping. Then, she began.

“I have a proposal!”

**219 – Creating A Bond**

“Ha? You’ve already lost my interest because of your little mistake. What do you think you can do to take that back, huh?”

“I can do something! Something only I can do! So there’s no way you’ll refuse!”

“Then, instead of shouting at me in the face, how about you tell me what it is already?”

Chouka’s expression stiffened at Ryosei’s words, but it was only for a second. Fueled with determination, she claimed.

“If you cooperate with me now, then I’ll tell mommy to grant one request from you!”

“Mommy…? Then that’s—”

Before he could finish speaking, Chouka voiced his thoughts and added power to her words.

“A God of Life! A previous Di Manes! Only if you cooperate with me, then I’ll make someone with that much power will grant you a single wish!”

It was certainly an attractive offer. In the first place, he wanted to have an audience with her mother and ask her about many things. She will not be obligated to answer him, but with Chouka’s proposal, he wouldn’t have to worry about that. But still, her reward wasn’t quite firmly built.

“How do you guarantee that she’ll grant that? It’s you who’s talking, not her. If I face someone with that much power, then she can just kill me before I even notice.”

“A contract! Right now, let’s make a contract!”

“A contract?”

“Yes! We are completely made up of spirit power. Compared to other contracts such as a Familiar Pact from Zerid and a Psyche Contract from Earth, which connect living beings to spirits. A Spirit Bond, a contract that connects two spirits is much more powerful! By connecting both of our cores and reciting an oath, a Spirit Bond will be formed. If you break this bond, then not only will you die, but your soul will be shattered and become incapable of reincarnation. Form that bond with me, and you will have one wish granted by Mommy!”

“I see… That is an enticing offer.”

“Then!”

Chouka’s eyes lit up with excitement as it sounded like Ryosei was about to accept the offer, but her guard was still up. She didn’t take that as a confirmation and was ready to move once more in the event that he refused. He was quite curious about the next actions she would take, but prolonging their stay in that room wasn’t a good idea. Stifling his wants, he spoke.

“Okay. I’ll take it.”

“R-Really…?”

There was still doubt clouding her face. It seemed like threatening to leave her finally made her alert of others. This was good.

“Really. Now, get off and let’s make that contract before I change my mind.”

“Y-Yes!”

Realizing she was still straddling him, Chouka quickly got off of Ryosei, stuck her arm out, and summoned her flute. The spirit power in her body flowed into her hand and shaped the instrument. Along with it was a heavy presence. A large bundle of power that sheathed her flute and made it seem impenetrable. It was her core.

“Now, take out your weapon. A spirited soul like Ryo-chan has no choice but to give it your core, so I don’t need to teach you how to apply it as I did. Once we make contact with our weapons, we recite at the same time…”

Chouka taught the chant they need to speak and Ryosei quickly learned it. He questioned why this ritual was so vulnerable, seeing as they were basically placing their hearts out in the open. But it seemed like it didn’t matter. A spirit’s body is strong only because it contains the soul. But after placing it in their weapons, their durability transfers. The weapon may be small, but it's as strong as having it inside their body, meanwhile, their body will be the vulnerable part that’s vulnerable.

He asked why they needed to go through the trouble of summoning their weapons instead of just holding hands, but it was a problem of distance. Their cores will be too far from each other. They might be able to solve that problem by hugging, but that was even more dangerous since one person could just shape their body into a spear and pierce the other person. Not to mention the hindrance to their vision. Ultimately, this was for the best.

“…then, we speak our pledges and confirm the connection. If you follow my lead, you’ll be fine.”

“Got it. So, are you ready?”

Ryosei summoned Kuro Yaiba and outstretched it to Chouka. Nodding, she did the same with her flute and placed her core next to Ryosei’s, the sides of their weapons touching.

“In the count of three, we chant.”

“Okay.”

“One… two… three…”

As Chouka counted down, their eyes stared at each other, confirming the other’s resolve. The moment she reached the end of her countdown, they both began.

“I am you. You are me. Our souls are one being in the form of two. I am He who Holds, grasp that carries your departure, grasp that releases your arrival. Ruler of Tophet, witness our pledge.”

Upon uttering the passage, lights of purple and gray emit from their weapons. They swirled around the two, encasing them in a sphere of strange illumination, most of them accumulating on the ground beneath them, creating a pool of light. Chouka continued.

“I am Chouka. Hear my oath. In exchange for Konjou Ryosei’s cooperation, I will see to it that The God of Life, Mei will grant his one wish. Betrayal be bane, loyalty be boon.”

Ryosei was slightly dissatisfied with Chouka’s words. Although she wasn’t wrong, the word cooperation was too vague. He wasn’t quite sure how this bond worked. If it was based on the user’s perspective then that would be fine, but if it was built upon the words used, there would be trouble. He couldn’t quite point it out in this situation though. Chouka was waiting for him to say his pledge. It wasn’t quite perfect, but he did great work getting this far. For that, he decided to cut her some slack. He didn’t know why but he took quite a liking to her.

“I am Konjou Ryosei. Hear my oath. I swear that I will protect Chouka and bring her to The Garden safely. Betrayal be bane, loyalty be boon.”

Chouka’s eyes widened at his words. He placed definite restrictions in his oath, chaining him as her guardian until they reached their goal. As she was about to voice out her concern, she stifled her mouth and continued.

“Voice be heard, words be honored, soul be fettered. I am Chouka, and I place my soul with this pledge.”

“Voice be heard, words be honored, soul be fettered. I am Konjou Ryosei, and I place my soul with this pledge.”

With Ryosei uttering the last word, the spiraling lights flowed into Chouka and Ryosei’s cores, the pool beneath them turning white and wrapping their bodies. The illumination slowly subsided as they merged with their bodies. The room turned silent and the contract was finished.

Then a hearty laugh broke the silence.

“Hahaha! Ryo-chan, you’ve made a huge mistake! You were too specific on your oath. Now, you actually have no choice but to become my bodyguard, hahaha!”

It seemed like the contract was based on words instead of perception.

“O-Oh, no! I messed up!”

Ryosei said so with a higher pitch voice than usual. It was supposed to indicate his sarcasm but it didn’t seem like Chouka quite picked up on that.

“Hahaha! Now, bow before me!”

It seemed like her victory was getting to her head. He needed to do something about it before her ego swallows her experience here to oblivion.

“Wait a second… If that oath was based on words, then wasn’t it you who messed up?”

“Huh?”

Her face twisted with visible question marks appearing above her head, clearly not understanding what he was trying to say.

“You said in exchange for my ‘cooperation.’ Then, if I responded the same, wouldn’t I be able to do whatever I want as long as you get to The Garden?”

“Th-That’s…”

Ryosei closed the distance between them and intimidated her with his large figure towering above her.

“Hey… Chouka, what happened just now, was it a fluke?”

“A-A fluke!? No way!”

“How can you become a reliable big sister if this keeps happening, huh? Your mistake was even worse than mine. You should be thanking me I made that mistake in the first place.”

“N-No! M-Mistakes are a part of growing! This was my first time making a contract with anyone! You’ll see, the next time I make a contract I won’t let that mistake happen again!”

“…If only it comes true, huh?”

“Yes, it will!”

“I guess we’ll just have to see then.”

While the two were bickering, a door to the room opened and two individuals appeared.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing here!?”

**220 – Black Rose**

A kappa and a tengu appeared before them. They had their weapons out and pointed at Ryosei and Chouka. Not waiting for any further unwanted development, Ryosei immediately used flash strike and swung Kuro Yaiba. Before the two could even think of defending themselves with their naginata and katana, Ryosei already severed their arms. In response to their shock of losing their limbs, he continued and took their legs. The support below them suddenly disappeared and their bodies began to fall to the ground. They opened their mouths to scream but all that came out was a sharp shriek as Ryosei sealed both of their mouths by transforming Kuro Yaiba into a cloth. Before anyone even realized it, the kappa and tengu that came to investigate the room were restrained by a rope and silenced by a cloth, their bodies placed back-to-back.

“…”

Just as Ryosei finished doing his job, he faced Chouka to find her surprised face filled with shock, amazement, and even a hint of fear. She then blinked hard and shook her head lightly to bring herself back to reality and faced the two spirits, the faint smile on her face showing her relief that she managed to secure Ryosei’s power.

“You two. If you don’t want to die, then answer my questions.”

Chouka said coldly to the two spirits.

“Did you call for help before entering this room?”

However, despite her intimidating tone, the spirits’ response was only a sharp glare of anger. Seeing this, Ryosei quickly tightened the rope and cloth that bound them, sending pain through their body. Their screams were silenced by the cloth to muffled voices.

Seeing that, Chouka took out her flute and called out to Ryosei.

“Ryo-chan, can you do that again whenever they look angry?”

“Hm? Yeah, that’s what I was planning.”

Chouka nodded as she brought the flute to her mouth. A calm melody filled the room, but soon it changed to an intense one. Moreover, the two spirits were reacting to her music. Their faces would contort into anger, then change to fear as Ryosei tightened their bindings, following that were faces of despair, then determination, then fear, and finally, their expressions softened as Chouka brought an end to her performance. She told him to tighten their binds every time they showed an angry expression, but in the end, he only needed to do it once.

“There, now they’ll answer every question we ask them.”

“Wow, amazing. Is this that your power?”

“Yes, it’s one that can affect mental states.”

Ryosei turned to the two spirits and saw their tired expressions. Whatever it was it really did seem to work.

“It really is amazing… Hey, you didn’t use that to read my mind again, did you?”

Since he was in the room, the music that came out of Chouka’s flute also reached his ears. He was reminded of the surprise he caught when he first met her. As his worries surfaced, Chouka reassured him.

“Don’t worry. It isn’t as effective against someone who already knows about it. I could still try to use it on you, but I would need to focus more to break through your mental defenses. Not to mention, you’d probably feel my spirit power entering your body if I did.”

“Hm… got it.”

She wasn’t lying, so he believed her. But in response to that, it was Chouka that showed confusion. It seemed like she didn’t know why he believed her so easily. She read his mind, but memories seemed to be a different story. After that, they began interrogating the two spirits.

There were no reinforcements called. It seemed like the reason the two came to check this room was because they felt a strong presence of spirit power as they passed by. It seemed to be the time when Ryosei and Chouka made a Spirit Bond. They didn’t bother to call for others.

As for their location, it seemed like they were in a secluded area in the Spirit World. A hideout of sorts. The building was a large structure hidden underground that spanned around 4 hectares, almost the size of Tokyo Dome with 5 floors deep. The person who owned this place was a spirited soul named Hiroto. He is a powerful person who brought together this organization called “Black Rose.” And most surprising of all, a previous Di Manes. Ryosei and Chouka fell into shock as they heard this. They were supposed to be the ones that were chosen to forge strong connections with other worlds and forge peace with the three worlds. But then, what were they doing here?

Chouka quickly asked the question and their response was… “I don’t know.” It seemed like the only reason these two were even a part of the organization was that they wanted to meet a former Di Manes and become a power to them. Their heads dropped disappointedly at their response. These would be perfect examples of small fry. They were fillers that only became a part of something because everyone else was doing it and because of the fame their leader held. If the whole world was turned on its head, these two wouldn’t hesitate to go against the leader.

After that, they asked about the structure of the building. It seemed like they were on the 3rd floor underground. Every floor had stairs at their corners. On the top floor, exits could be found in the middle of every side which leads to hidden entrances on the surface. To get out, they will need to reach the stairs, climb two floors up, cross a long hallway, reach an exit, and escape. Considering that the span of every floor was about 4 hectares, their faces paled at the amount of lurking and hiding they needed to do.

After being satisfied with the information, Chouka played the flute once more. Upon finishing, she told Ryosei to release their binds. He looked at her curiously but did as he was told. Then, the two spirits silently stood up and headed for the door without minding Chouka and Ryosei’s presence.

“What did you do?”

Ryosei shot a question to Chouka.

“It’s a bit of mind control. I told them to forget ever seeing us and patrol the route to the nearest exit. If they find someone, then they’ll scream in surprise and snap out of their mind control. It’s to alert us of others. Snapping them out of my mind control is just a precaution so that others don’t get too suspicious of their actions. But don’t worry, even if I release them, they won’t remember us a single bit.”

“Wow. That’s great!”

Ryosei praised her as he was genuinely surprised by her powers. Chouka then wore a smug face in response.

“Heheheh! It’s only natural! I’m a reliable big sister, after all!”

“Now, if only we could do something about you getting carried away.”

“I don’t get carried away!”

**221 – Escape**

Ryosei and Chouka walked the halls of Black Rose’s underground base. With the kappa and tengu in front of them to alert them of incoming patrol, the two discussed a plan of action in the event that they encounter an enemy or get caught. Fortunately, they crafted a plan they were satisfied with before they were found and reached the flights of stairs in the corner of the floor. They then began their ascent.

Ryosei didn’t have the time to look at his surroundings carefully, but this place was completely different from the Spirit Realm he was used to. Instead of everything glowing like crystals of one color, this place had its walls colored blue and tinted purple and green. They had various textures like rough stone floors and smooth wooden walls, but that part was the same as what he was used to since the Spirit Realm’s structure was based on Earth.

They passed the 2nd floor safely, but just as they were about to reach the 1st floor, loud screams resounded and bounced through the walls of the building. There, they saw what seemed to be a ghost stupefied by the tengu and kappa’s sudden outburst. They had a body of a human, but their lower half gradually faded into nothingness as they floated in the air.

Without mind for her appearance, Ryosei quickly took action and used flash strike to close the distance between them. Since the stairs spiraled upwards and downwards through floors, he used the stair’s railings as a foothold to jump onto the 1st floor without the ghost catching his figure. He quickly snuck behind her, severed her limbs, and sealed her mouth before she could speak, draining her spirit power all the while.

As that was happening, Chouka took the flute out and played a tune. Slowly, but surely. The ghost’s expression cycled through a myriad of emotions until it finally succumbed to Chouka’s powers. Unlike the kappa and tengu, Ryosei had to tighten his hold three times as the number of times the ghost showed rage. He didn’t quite know the relationship between anger and being able to successfully take control of them, but it seemed that difficulty is indicated by the number of times they become angry.

The ghost’s resistance finally faded as Chouka stopped playing and delivered a light nod to Ryosei. Seeing that, he released his bindings and stepped back. There, the ghost stood still, unmoving with a sloppy expression on their face. Chouka successfully took control of her. Ryosei looked around for other enemies, but there was nothing there except empty halls.

He turned to face Chouka.

“Good job.”

“A-Ah, yeah…”

Unexpectedly, instead of boasting about her abilities, Chouka had a gloomy expression plastered on her face. Finding that strange, Ryosei asked.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Well, yes… Sorry, I didn’t expect those two to scream so loudly. We might have caught attention. We should probably go.”

Without waiting for Ryosei’s response, she quickly controlled the three spirits under her control and began scouting their route to the exit. Ryosei followed without replying to her, but not without silent praise. He figured she would need more experience to grow, but it seemed like she was a fast learner. She only ordered the spirits to scream at the sight of an enemy, but she didn’t control the output, leading to them screaming at full volume. Realizing this, she opted to apologize rather than ignore it after a successful takedown. On the outside, she was refusing to accept her mistakes, but it was only a front to hide her embarrassment and protect her pride, but on the inside, she was deeply reflecting on them.

Now, all that was left was the 200-meter stretch toward the exit. Here, they had the help of three spirits. At first, Chouka’s control over the tengu and kappa was set to be released the moment they encountered an enemy, but Ryosei suggested they revise that.

When they encounter a weak enemy, he proposed that they keep Chouka’s control on them and take over the other enemy. If it was a strong enemy, then they would opt to release their control and find a place to hide. Since her power to take over others’ minds depends on their mental resistance. If they tried this on a formidable foe, then all that would happen is a fight to the death. Or at the very least, Ryosei would have to weaken and distract the enemy enough for Chouka’s powers to work. They wanted to avoid that since the ruckus they would cause will only attract more enemies, defeating the purpose of controlling the enemy.

The first 50 meters were uneventful, but a few seconds after that a loud scream reached their ears. It wasn’t as loud as before, but enough to alert the two. It was the path the kappa went to. Ryosei took a quick peek and found that he encountered a spirited soul. A human that had a katana on his waist. Seeing him, Ryosei quickly returned to Chouka.

“We need to go. He’s strong.”

“Okay…!”

Chouka gave a stifled, but determined response and headed to where she sent the ghost to patrol. Before they encountered the spirited soul, there were three paths before them. First, was the hall stretching directly toward the exit, the path the kappa took where he found the spirited soul. Second, was a hallway stretching to the left where the tengu patroled. There weren’t enemies there, but since it was in close proximity to where the kappa was found, it was a risky move to take that path. With that, they decided to take the path the ghost took.

Chouka released her control on the kappa and the tengu. Since they were a lost cause, she used them to slow down the spirited soul’s advance by confusing them with terrible explanations. Meanwhile, she ordered the ghost to stop in front of a room that was safe to hide it. Since the phrase “safe to hide in” depended on the ghost’s perception of the structure, it wasn’t a foolproof order that ensured them a safe hiding place, but it was good enough. If it turns out that it wasn’t safe, then they’ll just have to deal with the trouble inside that room. It was better fighting inside an enclosed room rather than an open hallway, so this was fine.

There, they found the ghost standing in front of a metal door, staring at it blankly. Ryosei was first to open the door and took a peek inside. There were workbenches and tools in the room. It looked like a workshop. He widened the gap and took a quick scan of the room. It was empty. Confirming it was safe, he urged Chouka in. When the two of them were inside the room, Chouka sent the ghost away from them, taking random turns all the while before she released her.

With this, they secured a place to settle for a while and make a new plan of action. They took three turns to get to this room. It wasn’t far from where they initially left, but they couldn’t say it was close either. If possible, they wanted to hide in the rooms closer to where they left, but since the ghost passed them, it was too risky to hide in them. After that is the remaining 150 meters to the exit.

They thought about taking control of passing spirits, but before they could form anything concrete, the sound of stone grinding on stone reached their ears. When they turned to the noise, one of the walls suddenly opened. Ryosei quickly summoned Kuro Yaiba and hid in a blind spot near the newly discovered opening. When the figure left the shadows and entered the room, Ryosei went for their limbs to disable them. But before he did, something unexpected happened.

“Stop.”

A deep voice reached his ears and suddenly, before his blade could reach the burly figure’s skin, it stopped, just as the figure ordered.

**222 – Spirit Smith**

Surprise coated Ryosei’s expression for a second, but he quickly followed it up with three more strikes. But they were all stopped by a mysterious force before they reached his target. Seeing this, the figure spoke.

“Sheath your weapon.”

Just as he ordered, Kuro Yaiba disappeared against his will. He didn’t know what kind of powers this enemy possessed, but he knew he needed to make distance between them. He was currently unarmed in the face of an enemy of unknown power. He couldn’t afford to be too close to them.

A man of rough structure, toned muscles, and a large beard, but despite that, he had a short figure. He was a stubby man that could easily be defined in fantasy stories. A dwarf. However, this was not the usual kind. There were parts of his body flowing like a burning flame becoming translucent as they reached the tip. Much like the ones Ryosei possessed. He was a spirited soul.

Silence filled the room as Ryosei and the dwarf stared each other down. Chouka couldn’t understand what was happening, but she could feel the thick tension in the air and stayed silent. Finally, the one that broke the tension was the dwarf.

“What are you doing in this room?”

He shot a question at the two with a stoic expression. Ryosei couldn’t sense any bloodlust, but that didn’t mean he was safe. There was a possibility of the enemy being skilled enough to hide such intentions. And with the opponent maintaining a blank expression the moment he entered the room, despite being greeted with a surprise attack, such a possibility was high.

Ryosei didn’t respond. But despite his silence, the dwarf gave a light nod of understanding. He then walked to a nearby desk and pulled something out. Ryosei wanted to prevent him from acquiring anything to add to his power, but when he tried to summon Kuro Yaiba, it didn’t appear. Whatever the dwarf did, it was still working.

He showed them a small purple orb. It seemed to be some kind of gemstone. Then, the dwarf began.

“This is a resonance stone. It can be crafted into various things, but this particular raw piece of mineral is used as an alarm. When broken, it will send a reaction to other resonance stones it is connected to. I have more than one of these. I’ll have you rethink your actions carefully if you plan on staying in my dwelling.”

With that, the dwarf placed the stone in his pocket and moved to one of the workbenches and sat on the chair, turning his back completely towards them. The two didn’t understand his actions. If you think back to his last message, it was like he didn’t mind them staying in the room. But was that really what was happening? If what he was saying was true, then it was possible for him to have broken a stone hidden from their sight, and was only feigning ignorance to stall them so that reinforcements will catch them.

While Ryosei was thinking of leaving, Chouka pulled out her flute and played a simple tune. It wasn’t anything complicated and soon ended within a minute. Finally, she decided to speak up.

“U-Um! Are you okay with us being in this room?”

“I don’t care.”

“I-Is that so? Then, did you break a stone or call any reinforcements here?”

“No.”

“Hmm, I-I see…”

Chouka nodded at his responses to her questions, but instead of clearing up queries in her head, confusion took hold of her expression. The same was true for Ryosei. The dwarf uttered no lies. His responses weren’t roundabout either. They were straightforward responses that will be caught by his lie detection without fail. With that ability of his, he should have been certain, but that only brought up the question… Why?

As if thinking along the same lines as Ryosei, Chouka spoke up for him.

“Why are you letting us go? If you belong to this organization, then shouldn’t you be reporting us?”

The dwarf then turned his head to face them. It seemed like this question caught his interest enough to drop whatever he was doing on the workbench.

“Then, let me ask you this, what are you doing here?”

“We’re currently looking to get out of this building. There was a mistake in the destination Enny was supposed to send us to. We’re not looking for any trouble, we just want to get out of here.”

“Enny…? Do you mean The Entity?”

“Yes, that’s her!”

“I’ve never heard of the Divine Beast making a mistake with that before, but who am I to say? I don’t understand that thing’s abilities nor do I care. If you’re looking for a way out, then as long as you don’t disturb our business here, I don’t care.”

“Thank you very much!”

Chouka bowed to the dwarf in gratitude and a cheerful smile appeared on her face. From that whole exchange, Ryosei was concerned about how trusting Chouka was. She didn’t doubt any response the dwarf gave her. But then again, she had the ability to control people’s minds, she even played her flute before asking him questions. There was a possibility that she just had the same lie-detecting powers as him.

“This is great isn’t it, Ryo-chan?”

Chouka turned to Ryosei with a relaxed smile. Not wanting to beat around the bush, he asked her.

“Do you have lie-detecting abilities?”

“O-Oh, so you’ve finally caught on? Yes, lie-detecting is a part of my wide range of abilities!”

It seemed like she gained more confidence after her successful exchange with the dwarf as she puffed out her chest. Hearing that, Ryosei wondered if the lie-detecting abilities he had were the same as the one Chouka was using. He wanted to ask, but right now wasn’t the time.

He turned to the dwarf who resumed his work after being thanked by Chouka. On the workbench, he was handling a rod with a glowing orb on the tip, weaving it around in circles around something. Ryosei couldn’t quite see what he was doing, but it seemed like Chouka didn’t question it. She either knew what he was doing and saw no danger in it or was just completely oblivious to it. He decided to ask her, hoping that it was the former. Thankfully, his prayers were answered.

“Yes. He is what we call in this world a Spirit Smith. They create spirit weapons for other spirits to use, and sometimes, they even contract with living beings.”

“Spirit weapons, huh? I didn’t know about that.”

Ryosei was reminded of the weapons they used back in the Battle Royale. If that was true, then a Spirit Smith crafted all of those weapons. It seemed like the Konjou Clan was more involved with spirits than he thought. Since they didn’t tell him about this, then they were still withholding information. He planned to ask his cousin about this when he gets back home.

Suddenly, a loud boom resounded in the room. It came from the dwarf. It seemed like he stood up as he banged the table with the tool he was using. The two of them felt the anger seething from his body like a fiery aura. Ryosei instinctively tried to summon Kuro Yaiba, but it still didn’t work. Then, he turned to them and roared, much unlike his previous cold responses.

“YOU’RE TELLING ME THE KONJOU CLAN NEVER TAUGHT YOU HOW TO USE YOUR SPIRIT WEAPON!?”

**223 – Raqeav**

The dwarf stared at Ryosei in particular with enraged eyes. He didn’t know why, but it seemed that his last statement angered the dwarf. Was he just some needlessly passionate dwarf that got triggered by seeing someone be ignorant of spirit weapons? He hoped that wasn’t the case. But it didn’t seem like it, seeing as the dwarf also mentioned the Konjou Clan. Did he have a connection with them? Before Ryosei could ponder the question further, the dwarf exclaimed.

“I WAS WONDERING WHY THE CURRENT USER WAS INCOMPETENT, AND I DISCOVER THAT NO ONE TAUGHT HIM!? WHAT THE HELL, MASAO!?”

The current user? Masao? The dwarf began spouting nonsense that should have been incomprehensible, but Ryosei tried to think deeper. Ever since his words, he disregarded Chouka completely and kept his furious gaze on him. He must be related somehow. Then how? He called “the current user” incompetent, was that supposed to be him? It was the only subject he hurled an insult at. Then, who’s Masao? The only person he knew with that name was his grandfather. If so, then the dwarf was calling out Masao after seeing him, an incompetent user. There was only one thing that connected the word “user” with Ryosei and his grandfather.

“Do you know Kuro Yaiba?”

“YEAH, I KNOW IT! GOT A PROBLEM WITH THAT!?”

The dwarf was needlessly aggressive with him, but he was still able to respond to him at least. Thinking about it, he could turn this situation to his advantage. The dwarf was angry that he didn’t know or that no one taught him how to use Kuro Yaiba, which right now, could pass as a spirit weapon. Then that must mean that he knew how to use it properly.

“Shamefully, it is true that I don’t know how to properly use Kuro Yaiba. So, having someone who knows how it’s used to teach me will help greatly.”

At Ryosei’s words, the dwarf began to calm down. When he cooled down and the anger slowly dissipated, he clicked his tongue and responded.

“No way. Do it yourself.”

An unfavorable answer, but not unexpected. In all honesty, he was hoping the dwarf would be as prideful as Chouka and say some cliché words like “I can’t let an incompetent user like you hold on to the legendary blade. Fine, I’ll teach you.” Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case. But even so, he tried to pursue him.

“Please! There are many things I don’t know about this blade. If I knew how to use it properly then—”

But he was interrupted by the dwarf before he could finish his plea.

“Let me stop you right there, kid. Haahhh… this is troublesome…”

He let out a heavy sigh as his eyes landed on Chouka.

“You, there. Tell him, what does a Spirit Smith want in exchange for handing out his weapons.”

Chouka had a confused expression on her face. She couldn’t keep up with what was happening, but he followed the dwarf’s orders immediately. Perhaps it was because she was in a panic that she just answered to relieve some of the pressure.

“S-Spirit Smiths, unlike the trending human businesses like Savor Soul, don’t ask for currency in exchange for their services. Instead, they make a contract with their buyers to use their weapons with heart and never discard it in exchange for another. A spirit smith’s main source of power and experience. By having the weapons they crafted continuously used, spirit smiths gain more power, increasing their ability to craft better weapons. These factors include the user’s knowledge of the weapon, the user’s growth in using the weapon, the battles won and lost using the weapon, the user’s refinement in skill using the weapon, the amount of unity the user has with the weapon, a-and, umm, v-various other things!”

“Hm. Good.”

Chouka seemed to have left out other factors, but the dwarf didn’t mind. If so, then her explanation was satisfactory and was enough to deliver the message the dwarf wanted to say. Thinking this, he scrutinized her explanation with the dwarf’s best interest.

“You want me to learn how to use Kuro Yaiba by myself… So that the father of Kuro Yaiba becomes more powerful… Are you…?”

Staring at the dwarf with a dumbfounded gaze, the words that trailed to silence were finished by him.

“I am Raqeav, one of the creators of your current Kuro Yaiba.”

He couldn’t believe it. Kuro Yaiba was a weapon that was passed down for generations, kept secret from the world so that no one would abuse its powers. Its father should be long gone, but if they were a spirit, then it wouldn’t be impossible to meet them. But just before Ryosei thought of how unbelievable this coincidence was, he caught on to his phrasing.

“What do you mean ‘one’ of the creators?”

“I mean it as it is. I am only one of the many creators of your ‘current’ Kuro Yaiba.”

Raqeav emphasized the word ‘current’ as he spoke Kuro Yaiba’s name. It seemed he wanted Ryosei to catch onto that part.

“Then, how about the Kuro Yaiba before? Are you the creator of that one?”

He shook his head slowly.

“No. The original Kuro Yaiba was made solely by God. After all, it was originally a Divine Weapon.”

“What? Divine Weapon?”

“Boy, are you familiar with the three ambassadors?”

“Ambassadors? Do you mean the Heroes, Hfixesi, and Di Manes?”

“Hm. Divine Weapons for Heroes, Gjia Eaixih for Hfixesi, and Empyrean Catalyst for Di Manes. These are the names of the weapons bestowed by the gods upon the ambassadors to help in their goal of uniting the three worlds. Kuro Yaiba was one particular Divine Weapon used by Konjou Masao. Long story short, that weapon was broken in an intense battle. Needing a weapon to help aid his allies, Masao sought help. With me as one of those blessed enough to work with a Divine Weapon, we crafted your current Kuro Yaiba. One I like to call, The Tampered Blade.”

“H-Huh? Wait, that’s not what I know. Wasn’t this a legendary weapon passed down through generations? Then why does it sound like…”

“It was made recently? Well, that’s because it was. It was the weapon given to Hero Konjou Masao 27 years ago. Exactly 27 years of age. If you’re wondering why they made it sound like some kind of relic made by your ancient ancestors is because of Masao. ‘Instead of a lame story of being a hand-me-down from his old grandfather, I want him to have a more exciting background like an ancient weapon or something,’ so he said.”

“…”

Ryosei hated it. He hated how easily imaginable that was. Konjou Masao, an eccentric but with great talent to make up for it. Or perhaps it was because he had great talent that he was an eccentric. Either way, he was told that his grandfather was the one that made his parents train him with the blade as a young 3-year-old. Others thought him strangely for it and even stranger for his parents to accept such an order. At first, all he could do was swing a stick, but he didn’t care and continued training him until the training was taken over by his grandfather at the age of 6.

Then began his harsh days of reality. Training with his grandfather was completely different from what he was used to, but he managed to adapt and keep up with his trials until he was given Kuro Yaiba on his 12th birthday. After that, he never saw his grandfather again after saying he had a “business trip” to attend to. He only follows his whims but shows great results that no one was able to reprimand him for it. He could see his grandfather utter the very words Raqeav just said in vivid accuracy. But then, Raqeav added.

“Well, that’s what he said on the surface. On the inside it was different.”

“What do you mean?”

“Eccentric as he is, Masao was well aware of that. He knew he needed to leave Kuro Yaiba to someone, but he didn’t want them to associate it with him. Seeing as the blade’s next successor was still a child, he hid the fact that he was a Hero and that Kuro Yaiba was his. He thought it would be bad if you started trying to be like him. His unorthodox fighting style, mindset, and incomprehensible actions. Those were all strictly his. He was afraid you’d start comparing yourself to him and instead of trying to nurture your own strengths, you’d nurture the strengths he had. Ultimately, it was decided it would be best to leave you in the dark for that one.”

“I see…”

Ryosei couldn’t deny that it was very possible for him to do what his grandfather feared. His grandfather had a positive reputation for great skill despite his strangeness. Everyone respected him. If the title of being God’s Chosen Ambassador was added to that mix, and the sword he was using was a Divine Blade crafted by God, the pressure might have gotten to him and it might have birthed a bad habit of comparing himself to his grandfather. Realizing that, Ryosei couldn’t thank him enough for this action.

**224 – Ambassadors**

“To think that gramps was a Hero…”

Ryosei never thought that grandfather of his would hold such an amazing title. He was an ambassador of Earth chosen by God. The fact that he was related to such a person was surreal. But then, he realized something.

“Wait… Raqeav-san, do you know the names of the other ambassadors?”

“All 15 of them?”

“As many as you can. Please.”

Raqeav didn’t understand why he wanted to know, but the determination he felt in his voice told him it was important. He stayed silent for a while, staring at the ceiling and making troubled faces.

“Hmm… Okay, I got it.”

“Really!? Thank you so much!”

“Don’t sweat it. It isn’t like these names were supposed to be kept secret or anything. First, with the Hfixesi, we had Firel, Nwen, Draui, Msena, and Kroiat.”

Ryosei didn’t recognize any of them, but that was only natural. He wasn’t expecting to know anyone from Zerid. His aim was somewhere else.

“For Di Manes, we had Yuuki, Hana, Shigo, Mei, and Hiroto.”

Chouka showed a slight reaction when she heard him mention Yuuki’s name. He was one of the few people she was close to, and the one that entrusted her with his power. He felt a sad story behind the two, one that she didn’t want to touch too often, so Ryosei pretended not to notice and continued listening.

“Lastly, for Heroes, he had Konjou Masao, Akira Leo, Honshou Mirai, Yutei Katashi, and Yukou Yuuto.”

“…!”

Ryosei’s eyes widen in surprise. He was expecting to hear familiar names, but he didn’t expect to recognize so many of them. First was Yukou Yuuto. From the scarce memories they had of him, they knew Yuuto had some kind of connection with Zerid. When they were reminded of the sword he was holding that looked exactly like Kuro Yaiba with a different color scheme, they suspected him to be a Hero, which is the reason Ryosei asked this question to begin with.

But then, there was an interesting name in the mix—Yutei Katashi. This person had the same surname as Yutei Yukai. It could just be a coincidence, but what if it isn’t? Then, Ryosei was reminded of her unique ability to be able to perceive and make contact with him. There was some kind of connection between them. So far, they’ve deduced that the connection has something to do with “desire,” but what if that connection had something to do with the three ambassadors? Ryosei didn’t like it. After all, it could easily mean that if the next generation of ambassadors were picked, Yukai, an innocent high school girl that has no knowledge of the life-or-death battles happening behind the scenes, might be chosen to be an ambassador. Imagining her getting sucked into this chaos, he didn’t like it.

“What’s wrong?”

Raqeav called out to Ryosei, noticing his pained expression. When he realized the face he was making, Ryosei scratched his neck awkwardly as he tried to explain to him.

“A-Ahaha… Sorry about that, I just recognized a few familiar surnames there. Like one strange girl I met the other day had the name Akira. It seemed like she even knew how to use a spear.”

He tried to divert to his true thoughts using the other name he recognized—Akira Leo. He possessed the same surname as Akira Ren. Like Yukai, it could all be a coincidence, but that didn’t mean the possibility was gone. In response to this, Raqeav said something concerning.

“There’s no way to be certain. But if you’re that curious, then you probably won’t have to wait for too long.”

“What do you mean?”

“Judgement Day, the day when all of the ambassadors are chosen and are given their blessings, is close by.”

“What!? How do you know this!? When is it!?”

Ryosei raised his voice at Raqeav. Imagining Yukai as an ambassador sent him into a panic. If it was close by, he felt that there was no time for him to stop that future. No, in the first place, he didn’t know if it was a future that can be stopped, or if it is something that will even happen. It was just that his imagination momentarily became the truth in his mind when he heard Raqeav’s words. It was an emotional reaction.

“Sorry, I chose my words wrong. Judgement Day has long passed. The only thing that’s keeping the ambassadors to be chosen and their blessings to be given are the Lost Maiden.”

“The Lost Maiden?”

“Hm. Due to Lord Hades’ death, there was no possible way for all three gods to choose worthy ambassadors the same as before. Lord Hades also knew this, which is why, right before his death, he ended the term of the ambassadors of the time and immediately picked the next generation. However, there would be trouble if the new generation of ambassadors were revealed before it was time for them to take on those titles. To prevent that from happening, Poseidon and Zeus chose a special being to become the Lost Maiden. A being that is used as a catalyst to contain the gods’ powers. She has the power to bestow upon the title of ambassador and their blessings as she sees fit, but she cannot change the ambassadors.”

“Then, who are these ambassadors?”

Raqeav shook his head slowly at the question.

“I don’t know. The only one that knows that for certain is the Lost Maiden. But, seeing as you’re here. I highly doubt the Maiden will keep holding onto that power for too long.”

“Why is that?”

Just before he answered the question, he sharpened his gaze and filled his words with conviction.

“Because a potential ambassador that dies is as good as nothing.”

“!?”

Ryosei was taken aback by his unexpected response.

“Little Ryosei, you’ve been using you’re blade haphazardly. Recently, you’ve used its release factor in a rampaging state didn’t you? I could feel it. You were about to die.”

“That’s…”

It was technically Senkyo who used it, but the fact that Ryosei let that happen was a part of the problem. If only he didn’t underestimate Senkyo’s control and left his body before he decided on using Kuro Yaiba’s release factor, he could’ve prevented them from getting trapped in Zerid. But Ryosei knew that wasn’t the only thing he was talking about.

“You’ve only been wielding Kuro Yaiba as a weapon. As an object. Your spirit couldn’t be any more detached from it than it already is. I won’t tell you how to handle your blade, but I’ll give you this. Do you know why spirited souls have their cores forcibly sent to their weapons?”

Ryosei didn’t speak. He simply shook his head from side to side. For some reason, Raqeav was emitting an intimidating aura. One that only the true masters of a single craft could possess. In the face of him, Ryosei, who was held for being a prodigy, was a mere flea.

“‘Fight with your life on the line.’ Those were the words Lord Hades responded with to the same question. You already died, and this is your second chance at life. With your soul as your only weapon, Lord Hades seeks to know if your spirit is as strong as your ambition to live. In this world where spirits reside, the skill and finesse you learned when you were alive are only second to the most important aspect of a spirit—Will. If you want to survive this place, become one with the blade and place your heart in it like every swing challenges your purpose in this second life.”

“…”

Raqeav ended his spiel and silence returned to the room. An expression filled with shame and regret filled Ryosei’s face. It should have been obvious to him. In his life, he trained the blade with all his heart. A refreshing feeling filled him every time his parents or his grandfather praised him. But when he became a hunter, that mindset was replaced by one of calculation and precision, and even worse when he became a spirit. He even thought of sacrificing Chouka when he first met her. He was reflecting on his actions, but unfortunately, no one would let him have the time to do so.

“You should go now.”

“Huh…?”

Ryosei raised his head as Raqeav said that.

“I sense it. People are coming this way, they must’ve tracked you down.”

“Wh-What!?”

Despite having this talk, Ryosei was keeping a close eye on Raqeav’s actions, but he didn’t make any move to call for help, he also didn’t feel he had the intention to do so. Just before he pondered needlessly, he shook his head with renewed conviction as he turned to Chouka.

“Chouka, we’re going now. I’m going to carry you.”

“Huh—Wait, what is—!?”

Ryosei took up Chouka in his arms as he faced the door. He was carrying him like a princess as he readied to make a mad dash out of the room. But just before he did, he turned to Raqeav.

“Raqaev-san, thank you so much for everything.”

“No worries. Ah, I forgot to mention this, but you should go to the Lost Maiden and ask for her plans for your powers. I have a feeling it’s going to be a rough road ahead for you.”

“What? But I don’t even know her.”

“Yes, you do. The Lost Maiden Freda. She’s at your clan’s settlement, right?”

“…”

Another shocker just before he left. Ryosei didn’t expect it, but there was no time for surprise now. He needed to focus on the trial in front of him. So, instead of asking for clarification, he returned Raqeav’s suggestion with one, determined response.

“Got it!”

**225 – Breakthrough**

Steeling himself, he faces the door. He could sense multiple presences gathering outside the door. There were still few of them, but given more time, they’d eventually build an uncrossable sea of people. Knowing this, he tightened his grip on Chouka and used Poltergeist to open the door wide open within a blink of an eye. The people outside had their weapons pointed toward him, but they didn’t expect him to suddenly bust out the door and run straight at them. They thought it was a desperate attempt to escape, but the moment Ryosei landed, a powerful gust of wind blew them away from him.

“Grhk…! Magic!?”

One of the guards exclaimed as they saw Ryosei’s shadow running down the hallway at an unbelievable speed. Other spirits tried to stop him, swinging their weapons and using Poltergeist to keep him from moving, but nothing worked. He would weave through the tight spaces between their weapons or use the walls or slide under the floor to dodge them. When they tried to use their Poltergeist on him, it didn’t work. He was too strong for them to be affected by their Poltergeist. They were hoping to at least slow him down, but nothing appeared to affect him. Almost like some mysterious force was keeping him from harm’s way.

In reality, he was using wind magic the whole time. It wasn’t a powerful spell, he was only manipulating air and increasing his speed. Every time he attempted to squeeze between their weapons, he would use both Poltergeist and wind magic to open a wider gap for him to enter. Every time he slid through the ground or jumped high in the air, he would use wind magic to maintain and even increase his momentum. It made enemies that were relying on physics confused as they missed every time they tried to anticipate the decline in his speed.

While all that running was happening, Chouka stopped struggling out of the embarrassing hold Ryosei was carrying her in. Instead, she tightened her grip around his neck and closed her eyes as she braced for impact in fear as the wind brushed over her skin as they ran through the accumulating numbers of enemies in the hallways.

Right, left, straight, right, straight, left, straight, right, left, right, right, left, straight. Ryosei maneuvered through the throng of enemies, moving through the halls, avoiding large numbers of enemies, but also sometimes going straight through those numbers in case they were being herded towards a trap. It wasn’t long until he reached the edge of the floor, but instead of running in the outermost hallway, he ran down the hallway parallel to it. In case the enemy anticipates their pathing and blocks them, he opted for the hallway next door to allow him space to maneuver.

They reached the place they left off last time, then passed 50 meters, and then another 50 meters. It wasn’t long until the exit was in their sights. As he was running through the outermost hallway after avoiding an attempt to block him, he saw an opening on the left wall, one that never existed in the past 200 meters. However, just as they were reaching their goal, Ryosei’s vision darkened. He still had his eyes open, but a sudden shadow appeared out of nowhere and swallowed his vision. The exit he just saw, the long hallways, the enemies, his own body, he had lost vision of them all.

“Magic… No, spirit power!”

As Ryosei analyzed the cause of his sudden blindness, he sensed spirit power wrapping his whole body. It wasn’t that his surroundings were suddenly swallowed by a shadow, but he was only made to think so. It was the same mental attack that Chouka used on their enemies. He recognized the feeling of having been mentally invaded as he thought back to the first time he met Chouka. He quickly empowered his body, focusing on wrapping and swallowing the foreign presence inside his head.

It wasn’t long until the shadow slowly dissipated, but just as it disappeared a shadow appeared below him. At first, he thought they somehow invaded his head again but soon realized that it wasn’t the case. He then picked up the pace, jumped in the air, placed an air foothold, and accelerated forward. Soon, long shadow-like spikes sprouted from the ground and reached all the way to the ceiling of the place Ryosei was previously in.

After seeing the damage behind them, he faced the path in front of him, but instead of seeing the exit, he saw two familiar sharp objects the Konjou Clan often used—kunai. Just as the two dug into his eyes, he used Poltergeist to knock both of them away before they reached any deeper into his head. His vision was impaired with no eyes to identify his surroundings with. He berated himself for letting his guard down. If only he kept his eyes on his pathing, the enemy wouldn’t have had the chance to take his sight away from him.

Suddenly, a large figure appeared from the side and grabbed hold of him. With Ryosei’s vision taken, it was the perfect time to launch an attack. However, what they didn’t expect was for Ryosei to still be able to move even without his eyes. Unbeknownst to them, he had the ability to perceive his surroundings by focusing his mind. The figure that knocked Ryosei to the wall and tried to pin him down was a large man with reddish skin and a pair of horns sprouting on his head. It was an Oni.

Just as he felt the solid wall squishing him in between the large Oni, he quickly dropped Chouka and slipped under the other fist that was going straight for his body. Grabbing that outstretched arm, he hurled him to the ground and followed up with a heavy dropkick to the neck as he caught Chouka before she reached the ground. While the Oni was momentarily stunned as he was pinned to the ground, Ryosei took this chance to rush toward the exit and leave the structure.

**226 – Fox Spirit**

About ten minutes have passed. An opening finally showed itself beyond the thick forest. Upon reaching the exit, Ryosei and Chouka were transported to a mysterious forest. Unlike the forests of Earth or the Spirit Realm he was used to, these trees had their trunks clad in purple lightly transitioning to the blue opaque leaves growing on them. The leaves grew and decayed at the same rate. Every five minutes that passed a leaf would have grown and disintegrated into small particles, mixing them with the abundant particles flying in the air.

Ryosei wanted to know more about them at first, but he had to move. He wasn’t out of the forest just yet, literally. Picking up his pace, maneuvering through the trees to throw off pursuers, he finally found an opening. It seemed to be a grassland. Just as they set their foot out of the forest, Ryosei quickly used flash strike to hide behind a tree.

Immediately after, a flash of light covered their surroundings. The tree shielded them from whatever that white light was. A few seconds after, it slowly subsided and a voice belonging to a female pierced through the air.

“I can’t believe how far you’ve gone. I swear, those monkeys never do their job properly.”

Ryosei peeked behind the tree and saw the owner of the voice, and most probably the one who caused that white light. It was a fox spirit. A woman with ears and tail of a fox, golden silky fur covering her fox-like attributes. She responded to his probing gaze with a sharp one of her own, sending a cold chill down his spine.

“You are?”

Ryosei decided to engage with the fox spirit in a conversation. He wanted to get out of the area as soon as possible, but desperately running past the person in front of them who has unknown power was a foolish venture. First, he needed to gauge her power, or at the very least find an escape route with many outs in consideration to the fox spirit’s possible powers.

“I don’t see the need for me to indulge in a talk. How about surrendering now? Five seconds without a response and I’ll happily take you on.”

She wasn’t having it. She knew his intentions and opted to push him into a corner. Ryosei might have been fine on his own, but with Chouka to protect, he couldn’t move carelessly. Unfortunately, five minutes passed and the fox spirit made her move.

Multiple balls of light flooded out of her hand and surrounded the tree they were hiding behind. They had faint presences of a spirit inside them with an appearance similar to a small flame. Based on Chouka’s talk about her past, it seemed like these were wisps. They follow their master’s orders as an extension of their being. She said they were mainly used for reconnaissance, but they were also an extension of their master’s body. Meaning, they could be used as a conduit to release spirit power.

Upon realizing this, Ryosei tried to escape the encirclement by running up the tree and jumping out using flash strike. However, he stopped himself just before he reached the edge of the ring of wisps. He was too late. It was faint, but he could sense spirit power surrounding them. He thought about breaking through it, but these weren’t the kind that would easily yield to panicked attacks. The sphere of spirit power surrounding them was so thin that it could barely be perceived. So thin and skillfully focused that a large amount of spirit power was concentrated into these lines and made it difficult to cut down.

The fox spirit sneered. Immediately after, multiple orbs shot out of the wisps in rapid succession, flying at Ryosei and Chouka so quick that they would be swallowed by the torrent of orbs in a matter of seconds. In response to this, Ryosei faced directly below them and swung Kuro Yaiba with his right hand while he was carrying Chouka on his other. A gust of wind shot out of his swing and overwhelmed the orbs flying in its path. It was similar to his Gale Fan technique, but due to the fast-paced conditions of the situation, he only wrapped his blade with magic and used an inferior version of the technique. It was weaker and had less range, but it was short and provided Ryosei with the opening he needed.

As he firmly planted his feet on the ground, he made a barrier out of his own spirit power to prevent the onslaught of orbs from reaching them. The orbs pelted his barrier, small particles of light dispersing at every point of contact. The rate he was getting hit was so fast that the outside seemed like a snowscape of small light particles. He could feel his spirit power draining like a vacuum was sucking him dry. He needed to break the barrier, but he couldn’t do it while simultaneously holding his barrier.

As if to respond to his silent calls for help, an intense melody filled their surroundings. He could feel the attacks weakening. Before he knew it, Chouka pulled out her flute and did something to the enemy. Then, after a sharp and extended tone, the particles floating around them quickly accumulated and formed a barrier beneath Ryosei’s.

“What!? This little brat…!”

When it was fully erected, Ryosei could feel the sturdiness of the barrier. It was the same for the fox spirit as she cursed at Chouka’s power. A single look from Chouka was all he needed to receive her message. With that, he slowly placed her down and readied to draw Kuro Yaiba, facing the powerful but barely perceptible barrier in front of them.

Ryosei planned to use magic to boost his attack and break the barrier, but then he remembered what Raqeav told him.

“Fight with your life on the line!”

Ryosei shouted with conviction as if to steel himself with those very words. He disregarded all of his basic combat knowledge and opted for a single, focused swing with nothing but his will to power it. Normally, he needed to empower his blade to break a clearly solid defense like the one in front of him, but he threw away that logic. Right now, he wanted to be one with his blade. He is a spirited soul, a mere remnant of the old Konjou Ryosei that was once alive. He was given this chance to live once more as a bodiless being. In exchange for this, there was only one, single thing the god that created this world wanted from him—to show him the strength of his will.

With his core placed firmly inside Kuro Yaiba, he poured as much spirit power into the blade as much as he could, filling it with his determination. To become one with the blade—he was not swinging Kuro Yaiba, he was not using a tool to empower his fighting capabilities, he was using an extended part of his being to cut through the trials that seek to erase his existence. His Will was being challenged by the obstacle before him. With that, he let out every ounce of his being into one swing.

Despite the raging torrent of orbs trying to break through Chouka’s barrier and swallow the two, Ryosei was calm and silent. There was no extravagant show out of his attack. It was a single, undaunted stroke. Immediately after, the thin lines that trapped the two were cut like butter. Taking that chance, Ryosei quickly picked up Chouka and ran through the opening he made. He rushed out, using flash strike as much as he could to escape the fox spirit.

He did so with such speed that he didn’t even notice the ground beneath him disappear. Ryosei took a quick peek behind him to see what had happened. From the looks of it, what he thought was a flat plain was apparently the edge of a cliff, and below him was the empty air. There was a town below them if that was any compensation. Though it wasn’t until a few hundred meters of falling. He survived an onslaught of deadly orbs and broke the barrier trapping them, but ended up falling off a cliff. This must be what they call “out of the pan into the fire,” Ryosei thought. He couldn’t believe the stupidity of the situation. He made a tired face as he sighed in exasperation, falling down the air as they succumbed to gravity.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!”

There was only Chouka’s scream as she finally realized the situation they were in.

“W-What power…”

The fox spirit exclaimed in awe as she stared at Ryosei’s figure as he fell down the cliff.

“Hehe… hahaha!! It looks like I’m going to have lots of fun with that spirit! Now, those monkeys better do this job right this time. Ah, such strong will with deep desire… I can’t wait!”

**227 – Plotting**

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!”

About 5 seconds have passed since Ryosei and Chouka began their freefall. Chouka still hasn’t calmed down and was still screaming in Ryosei’s ear. On the other hand, Ryosei was as calm as ever. Though, his face looked slightly pale perhaps due to the spirit power he used earlier. Since he never swung Kuro Yaiba like that before, it was a strange feeling for him. He barely took any damage from breaking the fox spirit’s cage, but it was a different story for his mind. He could hear a faint ringing in his ears as if he had tinnitus. But for now, he focused on the problem at hand. They needed to escape.

Ryosei turned his attention to the ground below them and used wind magic to negate the impact of their fall. He didn’t know if there was a method to negate impact using spirit power, but seeing as Chouka was hopelessly screaming for dear life in his arms, it sounded like there was no such method. Or perhaps she also didn’t know but this wasn’t the time for needless hypotheticals.

“Okay, we landed.”

“H-Huh…?”

Chouka gingerly opened her eyes and looked around. They were in the middle of a town where the buildings took shape of traditional Japanese structures painted mostly in a common shade of red, illuminated by the various colors of red, blue, and yellow lanterns. Although, none of these buildings actually had a solid color. Most of them faded into different colors such as purple, green, and orange, much like a color gradient. Otherwise, they would simply be transparent.

There was an abundant about of people walking around. Some of them stopped to stare at the two since they suddenly fell from the sky, but most of them just ignored them. Everyone around them took completely different appearances. There were what seemed to be humans, animals, living objects, ghosts, yokai, and other various creatures.

Ryosei took a few seconds to take in the new scenery which reminded him once again that this wasn’t the Spirit Realm he was used to. It was a completely independent world that took no similarities with Earth and Zerid. It had its own structures, residents, and geography. He wanted to look around some more, but the pressure of his chasers was still on them. They needed to escape.

Putting down Chouka, Ryosei began walking forward. A few seconds passed and sensing something was wrong, he turned around to see that Chouka never moved from the spot he placed her down, Was she still stunned from the freefall? He went back to check with her.

“Chouka, what’s wrong?”

“I-I don’t know, but I don’t like this fog…”

“Fog? What fog?”

Ryosei looked around his surroundings and only saw the hustle and bustle of any other town regardless of the world. None of them seemed to sense any kind of fog either. However, Ryosei’s response only served to worsen Chouka’s facial expression as it turned grim.

“…You don’t… see the fog…?”

“No.”

Sensing the alarm in Chouka’s voice, he turned serious. In turn, she took a deep breath and walked forward, urging Ryosei to walk as close to her as possible. Then, she began snapping her fingers in a rhythm.

“I think this is the work of another Mental Arts user.”

“What…? You mean the same power you use?”

The two conversated in a low voice as they walked forward, not looking at each other and constantly wearing stoic, stone faces to prevent their emotions from leaking.

“Yes. No one around us… no, only I seem to notice the fog which shows the enemy’s strength with it. We need to be careful.”

“Mental Arts, I see… then is it better for me to fight off their mental attacks? I was able to do it before when we were escaping.”

“No. I think… they would probably want that. Since fighting off a mental attack means focusing your spirit power to flow inside your body, it will be difficult to manifest your weapon and fend off incoming attackers. The moment you try to do so, they will probably strike.”

“Got it. Then that means they’re likely near us right this moment. Close enough to launch an attack with only a second of distraction.”

Ryosei turned his eyes to the corners of buildings, alleyways, windows, roofs, and other possible hiding spots near them. Nothing was there, but he wasn’t a reliable source of information at the moment since he was being affected by a mental attack. If they could hide the fog around them, as Chouka said, then it wasn’t strange to be able to hide or at least disguise others. Enemies could be walking beside them but he wouldn’t be able to notice them.

“What do you think we should do? We can’t just keep walking like this. They’ll attack us eventually.”

“You’re right…”

Chouka cast her eyes downward for a second. It seemed like she knew they had to do something but was clinging to the faint hope that simply walking forward was a viable option. With the question in her mind, she delved into silence as they walked for a few seconds.

“A frontal breakthrough like what you did earlier won’t work this time. Especially since their mental arts user can dig into your head… Ryo-chan, I think we should face them.”

“Face them? Are you sure? It sounds like they’re pretty powerful. You’re not just hoping this one mental arts user is the strongest among them are you?”

Ryosei probed Chouka as she proposed her idea to him. However, she didn’t falter.

“Yes. I can do something about the fog. Once we lure our enemies out or at least when we find an opening, I can get rid of the fog and bring the public into this. With that much commotion, we might be able to get away.”

“Hmm… that does sound good for us but are you sure involving the public is a good idea?”

“Don’t worry. People of this world can handle themselves pretty well. Besides, I don’t think they’ll bother deceiving everyone with mental arts if they just wanted to get us.”

“Then, lastly, are you sure you should be talking about this to me? If someone is using mental arts on me, then wouldn’t they be able to overhear our conversation?”

Chouka shook her head almost immediately as if expecting that question.

“No. After I realized this was mental arts, I began snapping my fingers to use my power. Although weak, it’s enough to block out the perception the enemy will receive from mental arts. Hehe… I’m a cool girl, after all!”

After minutes of maintaining a solid expression, he showed his amazement by nodding lightly to the idea. She reminded him of a certain schemer that always thought ahead of him despite leading a completely normal life until they met him. A light smirk then showed on his face as he responded to her with proud eyes like a father congratulating his daughter.

“Alright, let’s do it.”

**228 – Pursuit**

After finalizing their plan, Ryosei was the first to move. He picked up Chouka in his arms just like when they escaped earlier, but this time she didn’t seem to be too bothered by it. They sprinted through the crowd and charged forward. They caused a bit of a panic, but then it all settled down as if everyone around them forgot he even existed. It was the work of mental arts. Chouka was right. Whoever was chasing them didn’t want any of the public to get needlessly involved.

A few seconds after that, the ground in front of them turned pitch black. He saw this before where spikes sprouted from the ground. He considered using flash strike to break through before it even activated, but there was the possibility that it triggered was by movement, so he decided to rush down an empty alleyway. He knew that they were being herded, but accepted the invitation.

In the alleyway stood a figure with reddish skin and horns on his head clad in traditional samurai armor, donning a large metal club.

“FOUND YOU!!”

He roared and shook the air as he charged in swinging his club overhead with a slight angle to cover the whole space of the alleyway. There was no way to get past him. Knowing that, Ryosei kicked off the walls to his side and climbed upwards. However, that wouldn’t work either.

A man was towering over them on top of the building and threw down kunai to stop Ryosei’s ascent. It was the spirited soul they tried to avoid when they first attempted to escape. His wavy, black hair fluttered in the air making it unable to tell if that was just the way his hair was shaped or the usual spiritual flames that sprouted out of Ryosei’s body. He wore a gakuran in navy blue with a matching cap, staring him down with a katana resting on his shoulder while his other hand was throwing obstacles to stop Ryosei.

With two enemies blocking his escape routes, he saw no need to push through and retreated. In the first place, he only wanted to draw out enemies. For their plan to work, they needed to be in a public space.

Turning back, a beam of light grazed his cheek. Blocking the exit to the alleyway was the fox spirit that they escaped from earlier. With wisps floating around her person, her tail waved back and forth as she stood before Ryosei.

“We meet again, Darling~!”

“…?”

She winked playfully at Ryosei which confused him and the other spirited soul above them. However, the Oni didn’t seem to care and swung his metal club at Ryosei’s back. He responded by kicking off the wall and dropkicking him from above. With his arms occupied he shouldn’t have been able to defend against Ryosei, but then he roared once more.

“Like hell I’ll lose to this shit again!”

The temperature began to rise and a red aura wrapped the Oni. As Ryosei was about to land the dropkick, the horns of the Oni grew tremendously and pointed at his feet. He tried to abandon the attack, but kunai dropped from above, piercing his shoulders and suddenly exploding. He shielded Chouka but was pierced from below in exchange.

The Oni tried to pin him to the ground, but Ryosei already escaped from the horns and raced towards the exit where the fox spirit was standing. If he were a human, things may have gone differently, but as a spirit, as long as he had spirit power, he could regenerate his body as much as he wanted, so he endured the pain and immediately moved the moment he stepped on the Oni’s face.

Meanwhile, the fox spirit had the entrance blocked by the same barrier from earlier. The only difference was the amount. There were five layers of barriers blocking the exit. It took him all his focus to break through the barrier earlier, but he knew it was only a problem of concentration. In reality, the spirit power that cost him to break the barrier wasn’t much compared to the power of the barrier. He needed to believe in himself and become one with the blade once more. There was no room for doubt that only dulls his blade.

Sharpening his senses, he shot a quick apology to Chouka to which she responded with a high-pitched yelp as he unceremoniously threw her over his shoulder, allowing his one hand to manifest Kuro Yaiba. Focusing on his power, he moved.

*“\*Become one with the blade… Spirit Style: Flowing Thoughts!\*”*

As Ryosei used flash strike to accelerate him forward, he launched five swift strokes, weaving from barrier to barrier without stopping and breaking through every single one before he even reached the destination of his flash strike.

A skill birthed from the trials of life and death. Made only possible by Ryosei’s determination as he visualized the outcome and manifested it through his thoughts, strengthening his soul. The Oni and the spirited soul widened their mouths in surprise while the fox spirit only widened her grin as she whispered to herself.

“Such power…!”

Ryosei broke through the barrier and returned to the main street. With the three enemies left behind in the alleyway and no one else in sight, Ryosei called out Chouka’s name and began playing her flute. A calming melody filled the streets, spreading through every corner, wrapping the area with her spirit power, and finally…

“…”

“…”

Nothing happened.

“I-Impossible! What!?”

Panic began spreading over Chouka’s face as her surroundings refused to change. Her spirit power should have worked, but why couldn’t they see the bystanders? Thinking about it carefully, she was even more confused.

“Where is everyone else!? No one’s here!”

Chouka screamed out loud. Her spirit power should have worked, but even if that were the case, why were the other spirits gone? Their whole plan revolved around escaping through the commotion made by the sudden appearance of a crowd to block the enemies from chasing them down freely. Although Ryosei can be affected by mental arts, the same shouldn’t apply to Chouka, or at the very least, it never happened to her before. Was there truly an enemy out there that was powerful enough to overwhelm her mental arts, or was it something else entirely? Then, it dawned upon her.

“A spirit field user!”

“Kikikiii… How correct you are…”

An eerie voice called out to them from above. Turning to the owner, they saw a corpse. No… more specifically, a monster that is said to feed on flesh and corpses. With its wrinkly body that seemed to be almost devoid of muscles, it breathed out a nasty cloud of black murkiness as it stared at the two from the top of a building on all fours. A Ghoul. Chouka’s eyes widened.

“That fog… was that ghoul’s breath… The fog wasn’t imbedded with mental arts but with a spirit field… Then, what used mental arts on all those people!?”

Ryosei didn’t quite understand, but he could tell from the context. Apparently, that ghoul had the power to make everyone in the area disappear, completely countering the escape route they planned out. And to add to that, the person that used mental arts on everyone including him purposefully mislead Chouka into believing the ghoul’s breath was responsible for the mental arts. What cunning.

By the time they could recover from the surprise, the three spirits that we left in the alleyway caught up and surrounded the two. They were only taking positions, but they weren’t attacking. Seeing as how they were acting like the hunters he used to command when he was alive, he knew all too well what was happening.

“Are you going to show yourself, Commander?”

Ryosei said to no one in particular. Then, a figure slowly appeared behind the ghoul. It was a woman with long silky hair that reached down to her waist, but unlike any normal one, she was floating in the air with her lower body disappearing into nothingness. A smirk appeared on her face.

“We meet again.”

“…!”

Ryosei and Chouka were surprised to see the identity of the enemy commander. It was the ghost that they encountered on the stairs when they were making their first escape. How was that possible, Ryosei asked himself. When he first laid eyes on the ghost, he determined that they weren’t a threat. They didn’t have much spirit power, not to mention being easily controlled by Chouka’s mental arts. Was she somehow able to hide her abilities? Chouka seemed to be thinking the same thing. Gauging the two’s reactions, the ghost spoke.

“I guess you’ll just have to find out the hard way!”

The ghost shouted as murderous intent flowed out of her body. There were five powerful enemies surrounding Ryosei and Chouka. Although Chouka made a mistake, Ryosei didn’t blame her for this situation. After all, he didn’t even get most of what was happening. He didn’t have enough knowledge, and without Chouka, he would be lost beyond his mind.

Ryosei took another look at his opponents. Then, he blinked, allowing a set of numbers to appear in his vision.

*“\*16351/25000… About 3,000 left before I’ll revert to an Eidolon.\*”*

Ryosei took a second to think about it, but he saw a possibility to get out of this situation. However, it would likely send his spirit power under 13,000 which was the requirement to evolve into the Revenant that he is now. It was regretful, it seemed like the only way. The more he thought about it, the more realistic his plan seemed to be. The tension slowly released from his body and was replaced by exasperation as he breathed a sigh of annoyance.

He was only one step closer to getting back to Earth but then these five decided to get in the way. The fact that they stopped them when they were so close to reaching their goal probably annoyed him the most. Then, a single thought echoed through his head.

“\**I just wanna go home…*\*”

Suddenly, a flash of blue light consumed Ryosei and Chouka. The spirits surrounding them refused to remove their eyes from the light. Since they didn’t have physical eyes, they could withstand staring at strong light as long as they keep a sharp eye on the outside perimeter of the light, Ryosei and Chouka wouldn’t be able to escape. That should have been the case, but when the light subsided, the two they were watching like a hawk had disappeared. They couldn’t see them, they couldn’t sense them, and they couldn’t even imagine what they did. Upon seeing this, the ghost perched on one of the buildings said one thing…

“Whaaaaaat!?”

**229 – Anxiety**

Tuesday. Just like any other day the sun rose and pierced the windows with its bright rays. The sound of flowing water and constant squeaking filled a certain living room. It was supposed to be a room big enough to fit two people, but only one of them has been living there for the past few years. The sound of flowing water was cut off, signaled by a resounding clang as the only person present finished cleaning the dishes. They left the dishes to dry but a certain cup caught her gaze.

“I wonder what happened with Yukou-san and Ryosei-nii-san…”

Yukai looked solemnly as she turned away from the cup and grabbed her bag to leave the room. It had been four days since she last saw the two. She remembered like it was yesterday when Ryosei said his goodbyes and left her apartment room. There were no signs of any worrying development, yet they were gone.

She first felt something was wrong when she went to visit Senkyo’s house on Saturday. She wanted to thank Ryosei for tutoring her in her worst subjects. So, she made some sweets. She knew Ryosei couldn’t make contact with anything besides her. But a thought came to mind. What would happen if she fed him? Would he be able to eat or will it just faze like it normally would? She wanted to know. This was the perfect chance.

With a skip to her step, she made her sweets and headed to Senkyo’s house… only to find it was empty. She rang the doorbell a few times, feeling anxious that maybe she was disturbing them at a bad time, but it eventually turned into worry as the two people she was looking for weren’t even there. She thought that maybe they were training in the mountains again, so she decided to come back later that night. When she did, she was faced with the same situation. No matter how long she waited at the door, no one came.

Monday finally came and she waited at her seat with anxiety gleaming in her eyes as she stared at the seat next to her. As she feared, Senkyo didn’t arrive for class. She turned to Itsuki. She knew he always went with them whenever they practiced, but she couldn’t muster the courage to talk to him. His aura was too intimidating. She did, however, manage to walk over to Yuu’s classroom and asked for her, but her classmates only reported to Yukai about her absence. After class, she went to Senkyo’s house again, but to no avail.

“Haahhh… Not here.”

Clad in her school uniform with her bag in her hands, she made a detour from school and went to check his house again. Unfortunately, it was in the same state. She was worried they had gotten into something dangerous. Of course, that was a given seeing as they hunt otherworldly beings for a living. She knew that, but that didn’t help her from worrying.

Heading to the school with dejected steps, something unexpected happened.

“Oh! Yutei-san, is that you?”

“Whaa!?”

The sudden mention of her name made her jump. She didn’t expect anyone to call out to her. As she turned around to see the owner of the voice, she saw Honjou Kinro, Senkyo’s best friend.

“What are you doing here? I don’t think I’ve seen you down this route before.”

Apparently, he called out to her because she was an oddity on his usual route to school. Well, that was only natural since her house was on the other side of town. Gathering her strength, she faced him and responded.

“O-Oh, it’s nothing. I just went to see if Yukou-san was home.”

“Ooh! That’s nice! I never knew you two were such good friends!”

“Y-Yes, he’s always been taking care of me.”

“Ah, it’s good to know that I’m not his only friend in our class!”

Kinro seemed to be genuinely happy. He was like a father that heard his son was finally socializing for once. Yukai didn’t really know how to respond, so she kept quiet and gave him a wry smile.

“But, you’re right! I wonder where that guy is. Doesn’t he know that tomorrow’s the exams? What a time to disappear.”

It seemed like he didn’t know anything about his absence either. She was hoping it wouldn’t be the case, but that only strengthened further the possibility that they were in a dangerous situation. If Senkyo’s closest friend didn’t know about anything, then there was no hope of asking anyone else that lived normal lives. Her disheartened expression didn’t get past Kinro’s gaze.

“Hm… You don’t need to worry too much, Yutei-san.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s Senkyo we’re talking about here. Though he’s an idiot, he can be surprisingly reliable at times. If there’s anyone that can take care of themselves, it's him.”

“…”

Her eyes widened, then followed her mouth as she let out a light giggle.

“Hehe, you’re right. If it’s Yukou-san, he’ll be alright.”

The two then continued to walk to school. They were mostly silent with the occasional short topic here and there, but none of them minded that. Talking with Kinro made her feel better, albeit meager, but it was still a positive change.

The classes come and go with not much difference. It was the same daily routine that Yukai always went through. Sitting still in her seat only served to make her uncomfortable, but she knew she didn’t have anything else better to do.

“Ryosei-nii-san…”

She muttered his name as she looked out the window. She was just staring off into space to pass the time, not listening to anything the teacher was saying in front of the class. But then, she saw something. A blue dot… no, a blue flame. It suddenly appeared in her vision as fast as she reacted to it.

“Ryosei-nii-san!”

She slammed her desk as she stood up in a hurry. Without a doubt, that sudden fit caught the whole class’ attention. Realizing this, she smiled awkwardly at the class. But then, just before she folded and sat back in her seat, she shook her head and faced the teacher.

“I’m sorry, something important came up! Excuse me!”

She picked up her bag and rushed outside the door. The teacher’s voice calling for her reached her ears, but she chose to ignore it and ran out of the school.

**230 – Blue Flame**

Turning corner after corner, Yukai follows the blue flame plastered on her vision, floating above any kind of physical obstruction. Through the walls of the buildings, the small blue flame becomes larger and larger, urging her to go faster as she closes the distance. Although in a hurry, she retains enough sanity to stop and check for vehicles before crossing the street. She didn’t like standing still, but it was infinitely better than getting run over by a car. She was already in that situation once and she wasn’t careless enough to let it happen again.

Before she knew it, she was nearing the outskirts of town. There were barely any people around, but the flame was so large compared to when she first saw it that she doubted it would take her more than a minute to get to it.

But as she turned the corner, she bumped into someone and fell on her bottom. Although it hurt, she quickly picked herself back up and furiously apologized to the man.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I was in a hurry and I wasn’t looking! Please forgive me!”

She did so while bowing a few times in record speed that you would doubt she was actually apologizing since it looked like she was doing some kind of strange ritual. But Yukai didn’t realize that. To her actions, the man responded.

“…You’re more energetic today than ever, Yutei-san. What’s gotten you all worked up?”

“Eh…?”

Yukai froze as the energy running throughout her body suddenly dispersed the moment she heard her name. Did she know this man? As memory serves, she never met any other males beyond school and part-time work. But would she really run into them at this time of day all the way out in the furthest part of town? As she finally raised her head to look the person straight in the eye, she realized who they were.

“A-Akira-san?! What are you doing here!?”

It was Akira Ren. The mysterious high school girl in male clothing who knows about otherworldly subjects. The way she met her was a bit strange, but they still ended up being friends. Seeing the nervousness dissipate from Yukai’s eyes as she realized her identity, Ren responded to her.

“It’s nothing. I was just doing the usual.”

She said so as she glanced at the long gym bag on her back. It was what held her spear, her weapon of choice in fighting against otherworldly beings. She doesn’t say it out loud, but it seems that she just finished fighting another one today. She doesn’t mind telling Yukai, seeing as she hinted at it.

“I see… Uhh, umm… Good work out there today!”

“Haha, thanks! But anyway, what are you doing all the way out here?”

“O-Oh, that… I was just looking for Ryosei-nii-san.”

Yukai hesitated for a second, but then decided it was okay to tell Ren. She is her friend and the only person who knew about the world’s mysteries that she could talk to.

“Looking for him? Did he disappear?”

“Yes, about four days ago. But now, I think he’s finally back!”

“You think?”

“U-Umm… It’s a bit hard to explain., but do you want to come with me?”

“Sure, I don’t have anything else to do. Besides, if it’s something involving spirits, there’s no way I’ll let you go by yourself.”

“Thank you so much!”

Yukai beamed at Ren’s response. With her around, she became more confident with her steps and lead the way. Since she told her he was close by, Ren took off the gym bag and held it in her hands. It was unzipped, but not unpacked. She had her hand inside the bag, ready to take it out at a moment’s notice. She didn’t want to have it laid out in the open for all to see. If a bystander ever passes by with her weapon out, it would be a lot of trouble to explain it. The last thing she wanted was someone calling the police for a suspicious person with a spear.

After a few turns, Yukai finally stopped in a barren street, albeit suddenly. She was staring at empty space. Ren found that strange and called out to her.

“Yutei-san?”

“…He’s here.”

“What?”

“Ryosei-nii-san… is here.”

“…?”

She responded to Ren’s questions, but her answers were as cryptic as her actions. She didn’t understand what was happening. She tried to sense spirits but there wasn’t a single sign of one in the area. Unsure of what to do, she simply stood there and watched Yukai.

Unbeknownst to Ren, Yukai was seeing a blue flame floating in the middle of the street. Just before they turned the corner, the flame was in the middle of the block, inside someone’s house. She didn’t know what to do at first, but then the flame suddenly dashed into the middle of the street, surprising Yukai and making her stop abruptly. Ren was talking to her. She didn’t mean to ignore her, but she didn’t want to take her eyes off the blue flame.

After staring at it in silence for a few seconds, she finally took a step toward it. The sound of her light footsteps filled the silent street. One step at a time she approached the middle of the street. She stretched out her arm to the flame but stopped before making contact with it. What did she think would happen?

Yukai has no knowledge of spirits of any kind. The fact that she can see Ryosei in the form of a blue flame while he was in another world was something he never heard of. She knew all that, but then what did she wish to accomplish by making contact with the flame? Those doubts circled around her mind. At the end of the day, she was only human. What can she do that others can’t? Usually, she would be the one lacking, how can she expect to be different from others this time?

It was then that the blue flame brightened. A compelling, warm flame reflected in her pupils. The flame should be something completely intangible, unable to produce any sort of heat. Well, she didn’t know that, but that was what it seemed when she first approached it. But now, it was completely different. She could feel it Almost like the flame was manifesting into reality right in front of her eyes.

It was then that she remembered. She may not be able to socialize normally like other people, she may not know much about otherworldly beings, and she can’t fight them like Ren can, but if there was one thing she should be confident about, it was the fact that she was the only one that can truly interact with Ryosei.

Although Senkyo could talk to him in his mind and lend his body to him, Yukai was the only one that can make physical contact with him. It was something that she could do. To make him feel like an actual human again. If she can do that, then why would she not be able to make contact with him now?

Desire—the main factor that allows contact between her and Ryosei, that was what he told him while they were studying in her room. She only asked out of curiosity, but Ryosei gladly told her his findings, and now, it was the time to make the most use of them. She concentrated on her thoughts, trying to connect them with her heart, building up the desire to see him once again.

Worry, anxiety, anticipation, trepidation, excitement, happiness. Her emotions swirled as she thought about what would happen if she failed and if she succeeded, closing in on one, singular thought.

“I want to see you, Ryosei-nii-san!”

Ren looked over curiously, wondering why she entered a standstill. When she finally acted, she took one step forward and fully extended her arm, and gripped her hand as if grabbing something. Then, as she shouted, a pale blue light assaulted her eyes for a second. Her arms switched to cover it, but noticing it was too late, they stayed still as she shut her eyelids instead. Upon opening them again, she saw a man holding a sword in one hand while his other was holding the shoulder of a girl standing in front of him. His joints were loose with his muscles tense, seemingly in a battle stance. They suddenly appeared in front of her out of nowhere. While she was still too stunned to move, a loud, joyous voice filled the air.

“Ryosei-nii-san!”

“W-What!?”

Yukai suddenly latched behind Ryosei’s back, hugging him from behind. Naturally, he motioned his sword to his back at the sudden surprise, but he managed to stop himself before he did anything careless. It seemed like his guard was down when he suddenly appeared in front of them. That was good. Ren paled at the thought of Yukai getting cut in half if Ryosei had the reflexes to turn behind him and swing his sword. But then again, Ryosei couldn’t touch her since he was a spirit, so Ren’s face relaxed at least a little. That’s what she told herself, little did she know how real her worries truly were.

“Yukai-chan!?”

Finally recognizing the person clinging tightly to his back, he shouted in surprise. He then looked around at his surroundings. It was a street of familiar construction with solid colors filled with familiar sights. Much unlike the strange spirit-filled world he was just in.

“W-What the… This is… Earth?”

Ryosei didn’t quite understand it, but when his eyes laid on Ren, and seeing as Yukai was right behind him, he figured that they were the cause for this to happen. He searched the roofs of the buildings around them and the exits of the street, but he didn’t find any spirits blocking them. His mind caught up to his surprise and quickly acted.

“We have to get out of here! Come on, to the Konjou Clan!”

“Eh—Wha!?”

“Huh!?”

After releasing his weapon, he used both of his arms to carry Chouka and Yukai and ran in the direction of the mountains. He took a quick peek back and saw Akira was still a bit confused about what to do.

“Akira-san, you too! Hurry!”

“G-Got it!”

**231 – Assessment**

After a few minutes of running at full speed toward the mountains, Ryosei checked behind them and confirmed that no one was chasing them. He couldn’t feel their presences. He then peered into the spirit realm using Glimpse and saw nothing. Thinking that they were safe from pursuers, Ryosei slowed down and placed the two girls he was carrying down. Ren, who was following behind them slowed down as well and questioned Ryosei.

“What was that!? Why did you tell us to run earlier? And why here?”

She was clearly dissatisfied with the situation. That was understandable. Ryosei just appeared out of nowhere and started barking orders and forced everyone to go with him. Ren could sense it was a critical situation so she simply followed him, but now that they calmed down, she demanded an explanation.

“Yeah, what happened to you, Ryosei-nii-san!?”

“U-Uhmm, yeah… What happened…?”

Yukai and even Chouka turned to him for answers. Unlike how Ren’s concern was the lack of information in a potentially dangerous situation, Yukai’s concern was more about what happened to Ryosei after all this time, meanwhile, Chouka was just at a loss since everything was so sudden that even her brain couldn’t keep up with the development.

“Yeah, I’ll explain while we walk. We need to get to the Konjou Clan.”

“…”

Ren frowned as she heard that. She wanted to ask the reason why he was taking them to the Konjou Clan in the first place, but sensing that piling her questions on Ryosei wouldn’t do her any good, she decided to hold back and listen.

Ryosei surveyed the members: Yukai, Ren, and Chouka. If it’s these three, then there weren’t too many problems in telling them his story. He told them about how they got stuck in another world, Zerid. He was vague about how they got there and the danger of the situation by telling them this happened because of a fight with an enemy. When they got there, they didn’t have any way to get back home, so Ryosei set out to find a way to return to Earth. He then got to the point where he met Chouka and took the chance to introduce her to the other two and did the same the other way around. He then explained how they were trapped inside a building of some kind of organization and had to escape. But as they did, they were chased down by enemies until they got to Yukai, where she suddenly transported Ryosei and Chouka to Earth. Since he wasn’t sure if the enemies would catch up to what happened, he forced everyone to get out of the area as soon as possible.

Ren’s brow raised when he mentioned how Yukai transported him to Earth. It was one thing to be watching from Ren’s perspective, but from Ryosei’s, he shouldn’t have been able to deduce something so extraordinary unless he knew about what Yukai could do. Her eyes showed that she wanted to cut in and ask, but didn’t want to rudely interrupt him.

Ryosei saw this and offered an explanation, but not before confirming with Yukai that it was okay to share with them. Upon having her consent, he told them about a strange connection between Yukai and him. They didn’t know exactly how it worked, but they deduced that they are able to make contact with each other as long as they let the other do so and how “desire” seemed to be the main factor of this condition. Upon finishing his explanation, Ren raised another question.

“If that is so, then why are you telling us this?”

Indeed, Ryosei had no strong reason to reveal his connection with Yukai. Sure, Ren wanted him to do so, but he could have simply refused by telling her it was confidential. Ryosei nodded at Ren’s concern and explained.

“It’s because I want you all to trust me.”

He faced not just Ren, but also Chouka. He forged a contract with her to ensure that his actions lead to Ryosei escorting her back home. The fact that he wasn’t being stopped from leading her to the Konjou Clan meant that he still had that goal in mind and wanted to go to the Clan to achieve it. However, she was still a bit anxious about the situation. She was being led to an unknown destination where who knows what was happening. Ryosei wanted to reassure her that everything was going to be alright by seeking her trust. She sensed his intentions in his gaze and responded with a deep nod.

“Okay, I trust you, Ryo-chan!”

Satisfied with Chouka’s response, he faced Ren. She still had a difficult expression on her face. She wasn’t sure how to proceed, but she didn’t sense any malice in his words, that much she was certain. She closed her eyes and pondered for a bit. A few seconds passed, and finally, she shared her thoughts.

“I’m not going to say I trust you, but your words are genuine. I’ll come with you as long as I can stay with Yutei-san.”

“That’s fine.”

Ryosei’s lips curled into a smile as he heard that. She wanted to protect Yukai if something happened. In the Konjou Clan, there would be nothing that would threaten their lives, but the fact that Ren was set on protecting her friend despite that made him happy.

A few minutes passed, and finally, Ryosei came to a stop.

“This is it. Yukai-chan, Chouka, I need you two to hold onto me and never let go no matter what. Meanwhile, Akira-san, I need you to hold onto Yukai-chan and don’t get separated from her.”

“Okay!”

“Got it.”

“Sure.”

The three followed Ryosei’s orders without question. Yukai and Chouka trusted him, so they didn’t even bat an eye at his orders, but he was a bit surprised to see that Ren immediately agree. Did she know about the Konjou Clan’s barrier? That thought crossed his mind, but there were more important things to take care of. He didn’t want to get side-tracked and continued.

One step at a time, the empty woodland was slowly wrapped in a thick fog. Surprised voices came out of Yukai and Chouka and tightened their grip on Ryosei. Yukai slowed down a bit as her focus turned to the ground in front of her.

“There’s no need to worry about tripping. As long as you hold on to me, you’ll be fine.”

“Y-Yeah…!”

She forced a confident face and raised her head as they advanced through the blindness. Then, after a few more seconds, the fog finally began to subside and light appeared from the other side. There, they were able to see a traditional Japanese town and its residents filling the streets.

“We’re here.”

Ryosei announced as they crossed the barrier and the fog finally disappeared.

“W-Whoaaa…! A traditional Japanese town!”

“So this is what a settlement on Earth looks like!”

Yukai and Chouka both exclaimed in excited voices. As Ryosei and Ren were watching over them, Ren posed another question to Ryosei.

“Why did you bring us here again? I can understand forcing us to leave the area, but there was no reason to go all the way to the Konjou Clan, was there? In the first place, are you even allowed to bring strangers into this place? I can tell everyone about this place, you know?”

Ren seemed to be testing Ryosei, but he already had the answers to those questions in mind.

“Akira Leo.”

Ren’s eyes widened in surprise as he mentioned that name.

“Based on your reaction, you’re related to him somehow. He was one of the heroes of the previous generations. It wouldn’t be strange for you to learn all about otherworldy things from him, seeing as you use a spear—”

Ryosei thought back to the vision Senkyo saw in their battle with Fulgur. A man who his father referred to as “Leo,” holding a spear as he stood in front of them.

“—the same weapon he uses, it's highly likely that’s the case. What I’m about to do is something related to the succeeding heroes, we might even discover who they will be. There’s a possibility that you will be one of those heroes, and even if you’re not then at least you can forward the information to Leo-san. That’s why I want you here. Seeing who you are, I doubt I need to worry about information about this place getting leaked, not to mention that it seemed like you already know about it.”

“…is that so?”

Ren replied curtly, but it was clear from his shaken expression that he took her by surprise. Ryosei then urged everyone to follow him and headed for the castle.

**232 – Meeting**

On the way to the castle, the residents looked over to Ryosei’s group but never gave them too much mind. To them, they were just a bunch of students walking down the street. The fact that they had school uniforms didn’t bother them since it wasn’t like the village forbade modern society. Those who had permission were allowed to leave and return to the village any time they wanted and the conditions for permission weren’t strict either. They simply needed to inform an official to escort them while outside. Ryosei and the others were nothing new.

Their walk went smoothly for the most part, but when they were about to reach the cave that housed the Konjou Castle, someone called out to them.

“…R-Ryosei-san! Yutei-san!”

“That’s him!?”

“Yamamoto-kun… and Watanabe-kun…?”

Yukai was the first to react to the call. The group turned to the source of the voice and found Sora and Itsuki running toward them. Ryosei was surprised that Sora recognized him but remembered that he invaded his mind at some point to convince him that Senkyo was innocent of stealing Kuro Yaiba. Meanwhile, behind him was Itsuki wearing a confused face. He interacted with him before, but he never actually saw what he looked like.

“Hey, is this actually him?”

“It is, I’m telling you!”

“Oh, Sora-san, Itsuki-san. What is it?”

“What do you mean ‘what is it!?’ You and Yukou-kun have been lost for four days now! We were panicking about finding a way to bring you back! What happened to you guys!?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s been a whole ride… I’ll explain that later when everyone’s gathered. Once we get to the castle, could you call You-cha—I mean, the chief to Freda’s place? There’s something important I need to talk about.”

Sora made a difficult face but still managed to come to a decision.

“Well… Normally, there are procedures you need to go through to have an audience with Freda-sama, but it should be fine if it's you… probably.”

“Thanks. Oh, and can you take care of them while I’m gone?”

Ryosei points to the three people behind him: Yukai, Chouka, and Ren. Sora scanned them and his look couldn’t look any more confused, but before he could respond, a voice boomed.

“What are you doing getting little girls involved with this, huh!?”

He pointed at Yukai and Chouka as Itsuki shouted at Ryosei.

“Little…”

“I-I’m not little! I’m a Cool Lady!”

Yukai depressingly looked down to the floor while Chouka tried to protest, but Itsuki ignored them and kept his gaze on Ryosei.

“Do you think just because you’re a strong bastard means it’s okay to bring innocent people here!? Do you really think that, huh!?”

“I-Itsuki-san, could you calm down for a second?”

“Ha!?”

Ryosei had mixed feelings about this situation. He was happy to see that Itsuki is actually trying to be responsible for once and trying to reprimand him for bringing what he thinks are “innocent” people to the Konjou Clan. On the other hand, he was completely misunderstanding the situation and was being a needless obstacle for them. Sora sensed his distress and offered his help.

“Watanabe-kun, could you quiet down a bit? What do you think will happen if Sakurai-san hears you?”

“…!”

Itsuki’s head twitched and he looked around him in search of someone. It looked like Kosuke really did break through his stubbornness. His eyes were that of fear and wary, like prey that sensed the presence of a predator. After confirming that the person in question was absent, he turned to Ryosei again, but now with a much calmer demeanor.

“A-Anyway, you need to explain yourself. Fast.”

“I know. I swear, I’ll explain everything after I meet with Freda-san. After that, I can ask every question you have. So could you please wait?”

“…”

Itsuki’s eyes were uncertain, but he reluctantly accepted and lead the way to the castle.

“Then let’s go! The faster we get there the better!”

Ryosei sighed in relief as the storm finally passed. He turned to his three companions who also had curious eyes, asking him to explain what was happening now that two strangers entered the scene. Out of the three, Yukai was particularly curious. It wasn’t because two people suddenly came and made a scene with Ryosei, but because those two particular people were ones she was familiar with. She didn’t expect to find anyone she knew in the Konjou Clan, but the first person to actually interact with them were two of her classmates from school. She only thought of them as normal classmates, so it was no wonder. To their curious gazes, he responded.

“I’ll explain everything later.”

They were disappointed by the answer, but they also understood that it would be better to explain everything once they calmed down. They haven’t even reached the so-called “castle” and they already had a load of questions to barrage Ryosei. There was no doubt that more questions would eventually come. Thinking that, they all quietly followed Itsuki and reached the castle.

Unsurprisingly, the three visitors were in awe as they entered the cave. At first, it was nothing impressive, but the moment they entered the large cavity inside the mountain where the Konjou Castle lay, their expressions widened as they scanned their surroundings. A large lake of glowing water that illuminated the inside of the cave and a large castle towering over all of it in the middle of the lake. A mystical sight that they never expected to catch upon their visit here. Ryosei grinned as he saw their faces, but not as much as Itsuki who probably felt superior as he lead them over the bridge to the castle. The same scene happened as they first entered the castle and scanned the interior.

“Well then, I’ll be leaving them to you. Don’t forget to call the chief.”

“Got it.”

Ryosei said to Sora as he separated from the group. Yukai and Chouka turned to him as he left. Sensing their light anxiety, he responded with a light nod and a reassuring smile. The two nodded back and adjusted their gazes to the path Sora was leading them.

Seeing as everything seemed to be fine, he headed toward Freda’s quarters. For convenience, he turned his clothes to match a fighter’s battle uniform with their signature black coat in order to prevent people from questioning his presence. He passed by many people but they didn’t pay him any mind and arrived at his destination without trouble. He tried to open the door, but then realized it was locked. Normally, it would be difficult to get past this since locks in the Konjou Clan were set to trigger an alarm if they were forcefully opened by Poltergeist, but since he was a spirit, he was able to simply pass through the door. It may seem vulnerable, but ever since his mother created the barrier around them, there was no need to make buildings resistant to spirit attacks anymore since they wouldn’t be able to pass through his mother’s barrier.

He entered the empty audience room and headed straight for the door at the back. It was the one with a stairwell that lead down to Freda’s home which she created using Eternal Paradise. When he arrived at the bottom of the stairs, he was greeted with an abundant amount of nature where the plants not only varied from different species all over the world but also through Zerid’s biosphere. He used his spirit power to search for mana, which was all over the place, but there was one source that was thicker than any of the other sources. He calmly walked through the area as the sound of nature filled his ears.

After a few minutes of walking, a light humming entered his ears. It was familiar. He was reminded of the time when he and Senkyo mistakenly thought there was an intruder when they heard humming coming from the shrubs. Apparently, it was only a plant called Fruna shrubs that mimicked the sounds that it picks up. Seeing as there were no such shrubs nearby, it had to be the only resident of this area. However, unlike the previous cheery humming, this one had a sad tone as the melody swayed with small intervals of pauses. The person he was searching for finally came to view and he called out to her.

“Hello, Freda-san.”

“K-Kyaa!?”

She suddenly jumped backward and raised her arms up when he heard Ryosei’s voice. Well, he intended to surprise her a bit, but he didn’t expect this animated reaction. She peered through Ryosei’s face as she slowly processed the situation. Then, when she realized what was happening, she voiced out his name.

“K-Konjou-san…”

Her eyes first lit up with happiness and relief, but then they half closed as what seemed to be fear and guilt filled her mind. Her eyes strayed away from his gaze for a second but quickly recovered after a moment passed.

“Where is Yukou-san?”

“He’s still trapped in Zerid. I went off to find a way back but got caught in something. I have something to talk to you about.”

“I see… Then, shall we change locations?”

“That’s fine.”

She was surprisingly calm… No, that’s only what it looked like on the outside. Ryosei noticed that she didn’t have her usual composure when talking about serious topics nor did she have the energetic side that she showed when she gave them a tour of her Eternal Paradise. She was managing to keep as composed as she could, but Ryosei quickly caught onto her shoddy act. She was probably the most stressed about the situation out of everybody. Now that Ryosei knew that she had the power to release an ambassador’s power, it must have been worrying that one of those ambassadors was stuck in a dangerous world.

The two were silent, uttering not a single word with only their footsteps to fill the silence between them as they reached her treehouse and sat around a table on the balcony, showing them a beautiful view of nature outside.

**233 – Freda’s Thoughts**

“Before you start, I have something to say. Is that fine?”

“I don’t mind.”

Freda looked Ryosei straight in the eyes as she asked for permission. She took a deep breath before she began.

“From the bottom of my heart, I apologize for letting this tragedy happen!”

She said as she bowed deeply to Ryosei. The abrupt apology caught him off guard. From how Freda acted the whole time, he figured that she felt guilty for the situation, but still couldn’t help but be surprised by the force she put into her bow. He wanted to say something, but Freda continued before he could get a word in.

“This tragedy… it could have been all avoided if I simply acted properly from the start. I am very sorry for that! If only I had been better…”

“Wait, what do you mean by ‘tragedy?’”

“This situation. If only I had been better, I wouldn’t have placed unnecessary weight on Yukou-san’s shoulders. I’m sure you already know, but when I asked to have a private talk with Yukou-san, I did horrible things to him…”

Her voice began to weaken as she thought back to the past. Ryosei knew about what happened to them. To him, it wasn’t much. Freda was only telling Senkyo the truth about what was to come. Even Senkyo understood that. The reason she told him what she did was so that Senkyo could prepare himself. But apparently, it was different for Freda.

“When we talked, I forced a decision upon him. I thought I was being considerate but in reality, I only made it hard for him to refuse me. I carelessly told him about how he was most likely the person that would save everyone from doom in exchange for his life, I force upon him the weight of that title and tried to make him accept that by telling him… ‘You are not human.’ What a heartless thing to say. I did that thinking it was for the best, but that was simply me being naïve. It was…”

Her eyes faltered as they removed contact with Ryosei’s eyes for just a second. She held her arms as if to steel herself and returned her gaze to Ryosei.

“…It was simply me being shameful. I wasn’t giving Yukou-san an option, I was forcing him to become the person of my ideal. I wanted him to accept my words with struggle, but still take everything in and continue for the better of the world. I wanted him to listen to all the harsh words I was saying with a pained face, but still listen and understand my words. I wanted him to take every unreasonable thing I mentioned and act to make the best possible decision and walk down that path without question. I was… I was simply projecting the person I wanted to be, but could never become… It was a shameful display of power. That’s why… I’m sorry!”

Freda ended with another deep bow. For the first time, Ryosei was hearing her true thoughts. Ever since he met her, he had an image of her being a great person who assisted the Konjou Clan while he was gone. She did have some childish behaviors, but she would always be reliable at times when it mattered the most. That was what he thought of her. But the Freda in front of him was completely different.

She wasn’t some omnipotent being that could make everything better with the touch of her hand. She was just someone that made mistakes of all magnitudes like any other person. She was someone that could show a variety of emotions just like any other person. And right now, she was reflecting with swirling emotions of guilt and regret as she confessed to Ryosei her mistakes.

It was probably best if she said this to Senkyo instead of Ryosei, but he could feel that she was bottling up her emotions all this time, and it all exploded like a dam on him, who was the closest person to Senkyo at the time. Choosing the correct words to say, he replied to her.

“If Senkyo hears this, I’m sure he will appreciate it. He’ll probably be a bit troubled by it, but I’m sure he’ll be glad that you decided to be honest with him. I don’t have the right to judge you in Senkyo’s place, but at the very least, I think that you aren’t the only one at fault for the situation. This is all happening because of a cumulative chain of mistakes and mishaps. Blaming you for everything is unreasonable and unfair.”

“…I see, thank you.”

He felt the hesitation in her words. She probably wanted to refute him and take in all the blame, but she decided not to after catching the spirit inside of his eyes. His gaze was certain, returning her gaze not with an objective perspective, but with his true feelings reflecting in his pupils. He wanted to let her know that this wasn’t just an attempt to cheer her up, but simply his innermost thoughts. Catching the message, he continued.

“As of now, nothing too bad has happened. If we all manage to make it through, I’m sure it will be for the best, but right now, I don’t have enough power to make that happen. Freda-san, I want you to lend me power—the power of the Lost Maiden.”

“…!”

Her head jumped as Ryosei’s words entered her ears. With widened eyes, she stared at him as she asked an incomplete question.

“H-How did you…?”

“I met a person called Raqeav. He told me about the ambassadors of the past and the situation of the current ambassadors. The passing of judgment day and the existence of the Lost Maiden—you, Freda-san.”

“I see… Raqeav-san, huh…”

Freda said to no one in particular as her eyes dropped to the floor for a second then returned to Ryosei.

“So that’s what you want to talk about. Then, go on. I’ll answer any question you ask to the best of my power.”

“Thank you.”

Ryosei returned with a light bow of appreciation.

“First, who are the current ambassadors?”

“Not only the ambassadors of Earth but as well as other worlds?”

“That’s right.”

“…I can reveal their names to you. But, do you truly think that knowing them will do you any good?”

“What?”

Ryosei tilted his head slightly, not understanding Freda’s question.

“As I have experienced with Yukou-san, there are times that it is better for others not to know who they are yet. If I tell you the names of the ambassadors, what do you plan on doing with that information? It can indeed be helpful for discerning who will be allies and their importance in a situation. However, can you be certain that you will not make the same mistake I have with Yukou-san? If you do not give me a definite answer, I will have to refuse you.”

**234 – Future Plans**

“Hmm…”

Ryosei stopped to think. Freda brought up a good argument. At first, Ryosei simply wanted to know the names of the ambassadors for convenience. The more he knows, the better the decisions he will make in situations. But it was as she said, these benefits do not come without consequence. If he used that information poorly, it could only make things worse. Time passed quietly on the treehouse balcony. Neither of them said a word as Ryosei silently deliberated Freda’s question. It was only after a few minutes did he speak again.

“Then, I will change the question. Of the people closest to me, who are ambassadors?”

“…”

Freda stayed silent, analyzing the validity of Ryosei’s question. He didn’t want to be refused here, so he explained his train of thought.

“I’m not sure I will be able to make the right decisions with other ambassadors, but if it's with the people I already know, I’m sure I will be able to make full use of that information. Not to mention that I may need them to help me retrieve Senkyo. I cannot do this alone, so, please.”

Freda closed her eyes as she thought, and finally, nodded lightly.

“I understand. I also think that it would be difficult to imagine bringing back Yukou-san without the power of the ambassadors. If it’s the people close to you, it should be no problem for me to reveal them.”

“Thank you!”

Ryosei bowed to her in gratitude. Freda watched his actions and let out a light giggle. Ryosei returned to sitting straight and threw a curious glance at her. Noticing it, she explained.

“Oh sorry. It’s just that I was the one bowing to you a while ago and now you’re the one doing it, I couldn’t help but laugh, haha…”

“Is that so?”

He tilted his head, seemingly not picking up Freda’s sense of humor. After her laughter subsided, she said to Ryosei.

“Okay. Now, for the ambassadors close to you they would be—”

“Ryosei!”

As Freda was talking, a loud voice boomed and cut her off. Turning to the source, they saw a young man in a kimono who was strangely disheveled compared to his usual image.

“Oh, You-chan, you’re here.”

He was the current chief of the Konjou Clan. Unlike his usual prim image, he was a bit sweaty and was panting as he arrived at the door. He quickly controlled his breathing before walking up to the two as he wiped off the sweat on his forehead.

“Did you just run all the way over here?”

Ryosei shot a question at him as he observed his current state.

“Well, maybe just a bit. I was held back by some paperwork so I rushed over here after I finished them. You were calling for me, weren’t you? Also, what do you think you’re doing!? Do you know how worried everyone was while you were gone!? You’ve been gone for four days after a report saying that all hell went loose so everyone had to retreat. Then when they got back you were nowhere to be found. How do you think that makes us feel, huh!? You could have at least dropped by my office first!”

“W-Wait a second, calm down…”

*\*“All hell went loose!?” Is that what Haruto wrote down in the report!? Well, he wasn’t far off, but he could have a least toned it down a bit!\**

The image of the unkempt man-child crossed his mind. He was hoping that his report would be as proper as the side of him he showed in the battle with the skeletons, but that was simply wishful thinking. Wanting to control the situation, Ryosei gave an apology to make progress.

“I’m really, really, really sorry, okay!? I went to Freda-san first because it was something incredibly important! That’s why I called you here. Come on, You-chan, you can lecture me all you want later, but let’s have this conversation first, okay?”

Yousuke turned his gaze to Freda who was sitting right across from Ryosei. Seeing the difficult face she was making, he decided it was better to stop for now and took a seat on an empty chair.

“I understand. But just so you know, this isn’t over.”

“G-Got it…”

Although Ryosei was a bit bothered, he was actually slightly relieved to see how he was acting. Recently he had been able to act properly as the chief of the clan, but it was refreshing to know that his personality from the past wasn’t gone.

“Then, what are we talking about?”

Yousuke asked as he faced the two.

“Okay, I’ll explain.”

Giving Yousuke a rundown on what happened so far, he finally proceeded to discuss their future plans and how to get back Senkyo.

**235 – Conversation**

“Here’s a cup of tea, Yutei-san.”

“O-Oh, thank you.”

“Here’s yours, Akira-san.”

“Thank you.”

“And Chouka-chan… can’t drink, right?”

“Yep, don’t worry about me.”

“…”

Yukai, Ren, and Chouka were sitting around a table being served tea by Sora while enduring Itsuki’s silent gaze. It was no question that Yukai couldn’t handle it and kept her head toward the floor but Ren and Chouka didn’t mind. Ren even stared back. She didn’t like how he was making Yukai uncomfortable and decided to call him out.

“Watanebe-san, could you please stop staring? You’re bothering us.”

“Ha? What the hell?”

“What? I’m just asking you to stop being rude. What gave you the right to be angry?”

“The fuck is your problem, huh?”

“N-Now, now! Let’s all calm down. Watanabe-kun, stop staring! They’re guests, we can’t be bothering them!”

“I didn’t even do anything! I’m just looking!”

“That’s the problem! Why are you even staring at them in the first place?”

“I mean, doesn’t it bother you? Those guys were gone for days and one of them suddenly comes back with two little girls and some random guy! This is suspicious as hell! He said he was going to explain but then he went off somewhere when we got here!”

“A-A guy!? Watanabe-kun, Akira-san is clearly a woman! You can tell from her face, no one in their right mind would mistake her for anything else!”

“…!”

Yukai suddenly shrunk back after hearing Sora’s statement. Ren noticed this and couldn’t help but let out a wry smile.

“H-Huh? A woman? You’re joking.”

“He’s right.”

Ren cut in and confirmed Sora’s words before the two began arguing about her gender. Sora let out a sigh as he lightly bowed to Ren as thanks for stopping the impending argument that he saw behind Itsuki’s words.

“See, you were just being rude. And another thing, it’s not that I’m not curious but Ryosei-san isn’t here to answer our questions. He’s the one that knows everything that happened, what if they don’t even know and just got caught in some trouble with Ryosei-san? You’ll just end up bothering them like you are now, so could you just wait for him to come back?”

“…”

Itsuki went quiet when Sora told him off. Sora’s eyes widened in surprise at his obedience and let out a sigh of relief—if only.

“NO, I’M NOT CONVINCED!”

“Whyy??”

Ignoring Sora’s attempts to stop him, he faced the three.

“What happened with you guys and Ryosei? Tell me everything or else!”

“Like we would talk to someone with that attitude. Are you sure this person is a hunter and not just some stray delinquent? I thought the hunters of the Konjou Clan were more disciplined than this.”

Ren answered as she stared at Sora as if shooting him a complaint. He couldn’t help but smile wryly when he found it a bit hard to deny.

“The fuck did you just say!?”

“STOP IT, BOTH OF YOU!!”

Ren was about to give Itsuki another piece of her mind but was cut off by Sora. The room finally dove into silence as everyone stared at Sora.

“Okay, that’s good… I think we just got off the wrong foot. Basically, Watanabe-kun just wants to know more about you guys.”

“Ha? What are you—”

“Stop. Watanabe-kun.”

“…K-Krh… tch!”

Sora stared at him blankly with deadpan eyes and responded in a monotone voice. Making it look like the person filled with expressions that was trying to communicate with them earlier was nothing but a myth. Even the other three that were overlooking the situation were a bit surprised. In the face of those eyes and that static voice, even he knew that the only thing that lay beyond that was nothing but trouble and decided to concede.

With a satisfied nod, he turned back to the three.

“Okay, basically, we want to know more about you guys. But it’d be rude if we didn’t introduce ourselves first. I’m Yamamoto Sora, a 2nd year at Honshou Academy and Yutei-san’s classmate. As for why I’m a hunter, I was taken in by the clan after an incident with a rampaging demon when I was a child. And now, I became a hunter to fight those sorts of things. I wouldn’t say that I did that to fight for the public, but more like to survive. Anyway, feel free to ask me any question you have and I’ll answer them to the best of my ability.”

“…”

The three seemed to be satisfied with Sora’s introduction as their strained faces softened. To continue to flow, Sora nudged Itsuki to do the same but he wasn’t quite as courteous as him.

“What?”

“Introduce yourself. Now.”

“U-Ugh…”

Itsuki first resisted, but Sora urged him with the same expressionless face and monotone voice as before. With a tired groan, he reluctantly turned his face to look the three in the eyes and spoke.

“Watanabe Itsuki. I’m in the same class as these two and I’m a hunter because I want to. That’s all.”

No one was clearly satisfied with his introduction, but Sora didn’t hound him for it and decided to extend his introduction.

“He’s a new hunter that started a little over a month ago. Despite what he says, I’m sure he has his own reasons he wanted to become a hunter. After all, he’s quite a powerful brute class that can match even veterans in a head-to-head fight. Ah, if you’re wondering what a brute class is, it’s a category of hunters that fight using their fighting spirit, so if he’s that powerful, then whatever he’s fighting for is definitely nothing to scoff at. He may be a bit wild but he’s not all that bad, at the very least, he’s trying his best.”

“I see.”

Ren nodded after hearing Sora’s opinion of him. Yukai looked a bit surprised, her eyes widened as she listened to Sora’s words carefully. Meanwhile, Chouka was continuously nodding as she took notes in a notepad that appeared out of nowhere. Yukai and Itsuki didn’t seem to understand where she got it but Sora and Ren both knew that she made it from her spirit power. But still, they wondered if the notes she was taking would still be intact once she absorbs them back into her body. Ren, who seemed to appreciate Sora acting as a mediator then began.

“Then, I am Akira Ren. I’m a 2nd year at Mizuchi Academy. I don’t belong to any organizations, but I do fight the same creatures as you do. As for why I decided to go to Mizuchi, it’s the same as every person who gets accepted there. Simply to be able to fight against these otherworldly beings. This was probably my father’s influence, but the last thing I want is to be the one useless in times of need.”

“Huh? What’s with that? That doesn’t make sense at all.”

Itsuki commented after hearing Ren’s introduction. He didn’t understand how Mizuchi Academy suddenly became connected to fighting otherworldly beings. Those two things shouldn’t have any relation, but Sora explained otherwise.

“Mizuchi Academy is a school that specializes in training future hunters. Well, ‘hunters’ is a term unique to the Konjou Clan, so they’ll be called different things depending on the organization they get in, but basically, the school trains people to fight otherworldly beings.”

“Huuuh!? That’s a thing!?”

“Yes, but from what I remember Mizuchi was built recently. It’s only been running for two years so it hasn’t built much of a reputation yet… uuh, I think?”

“What are you hesitating for all of the sudden?”

“No, it’s just that I realized that there are a lot of students going to Mizuchi despite being a recent school… It shouldn’t have that much of a reputation yet but isn’t it too famous especially since they only accept people like us?”

“How should I know? You’re the one telling the story!”

“Yeah, thought so…”

**236 – Everyone’s Mysteries**

As Sora trailed off, for the first time, Yukai got the chance to speak her thoughts.

“T-Then, if such a school existed, why aren’t Yamamoto-san and the other young hunters studying there? Wouldn’t that be a better option than going to a normal school like Honshou?”

Sora stared in surprise at her sudden question. She must have been so interested in the topic that she gathered the courage to speak, but most importantly, he didn’t quite know how to answer the question.

“U-Uhh… I-I’m not sure. Maybe it’s because it's not yet reliable since it’s a new school? We do regular training here in the Konjou Clan so maybe they thought it wasn’t needed…”

“Hm? You don’t know?”

The one to ask him to expound on his answer was Ren. Perhaps because she thought it was strange that a member of the clan didn’t know something that should have been obvious? The question floated around Sora’s head for a bit as he deliberated on how to answer Ren. After a few seconds, he finally thought of a good response.

“Yes, sorry about that. I was never really interested so I never thought to ask. I just thought that going to school and training here in the clan was better than going out of our way to attend Mizuchi but now that I thought about it Mizuchi would be better since we would be able to engage with other people like us.”

“I see… you don’t know. Well, I think that’s fine. It might just mean that the higher-ups had a different plan in mind.”

“Perhaps…”

Sora wasn’t quite satisfied with that generalized answer and made a mental note to ask Kosuke about it later.

“U-Um! I’d like to introduce myself too!”

Yukai announced as she broke Sora’s train of thought and caught the eye of everyone present. She must have been waiting for a good time to cut in since they deviated from the main topic of introduction into a tangent about Mizuchi Academy. Bringing back the conversation to the original subject, she spoke.

“I’m Yutei Yukai! A 2nd year at Honshou Academy! …And, u-uhmm, I don’t know much about these otherworldly topics, so I don’t get much of what’s happening, but for some reason, I have a special connection with Ryosei-nii-san that lets me interact with him!”

“A special connection? The hell are you talking about?”

Itsuki latched onto Yukai’s words albeit aggressively. Ren didn’t like that and sent a glare of intimidation down his way while Sora’s face twisted into a troubled expression.

“Y-Yes! I’ll explain! For some reason, I can touch Ryosei-nii-san even though he’s a spirit, and just earlier today, I was able to… uhhmm, c-call? I think… I was able to call Ryosei-nii-san from somewhere and appeared in front of us!”

“???”

Itsuki and Sora were quite confused with Yukai’s explanation. Her words didn’t quite deliver what she wanted to tell them, since she didn’t know how to explain it either, it made sense, but that didn’t help the fact that they didn’t understand her. Sensing that disconnection, Yukai began stammering as she tried to think about how to resolve the problem. Ren didn’t want to make it any more difficult for her and decided to throw her a lifeline.

“She was able to summon Konjou-san even though he was in another world. I’m not sure how it happened, but there was no doubt about what I witnessed. Konjou-san said that ‘desire’ is a large factor in their connection, but none of us, not even Konjou-san himself understands how their connection works.”

“W-What…?”

“That’s insane!”

Sora’s voice trailed off in awe while Itsuki shouted in refusal to accept Ren’s words, but both of them stared at Yukai, trying to scrutinize her and perhaps pick something up that might explain what Ren just said. Then, Sora asked her the question that was bothering him even before he arrived in the Konjou Clan.

“Then, Yutei-san, was your connection with Ryosei-san related to you shouting his name earlier in the classroom?”

“A-Ah!”

Yukai replayed the memory in her head that lead her to find Ryosei in the first place. To her, it felt so long ago that she had even forgotten she did that despite it being only a few hours ago.

“Yes…”

“Wow… Actually, that’s what made us rush over to the Konjou Clan today. We found it strange that you said Ryosei-san’s name and wanted to report it to the clan chief but we found you guys before we could.”

“Y-You were going to report me!?”

“A-Ah… No, it’s not like that! You see, the chief is actually Ryosei-san’s cousin, so we wanted to ask him if he ever met you when he was alive… or something like that.”

“O-Oh… is that so? That’s a relief…”

“Haha…”

Sora let out an awkward laugh as he somehow prevented Yukai from getting intimidated again. He was surprised to find out Yukai’s connection with Ryosei, but now that he was talking to her again, he was sure that the Yukai he saw in class was no different from the one in front of them.

“Oh, then it’s my turn!”

Chouka said as the notes she was writing the whole time were absorbed back into her body. She stood up with a confident pose as she faced everyone around the table.

“I’m Chouka, a Cool Lady! When I first met Ryo-chan in the Spirit Realm, I wittingly recruited him to help me achieve my goals, and later on, with my quick thinking and cunning, made a Spirit Bond with him to keep him on a leash! ….Well, he might have helped me out a little, but that’s not the point! We were accidentally transported to Black Rose’s secret base but managed to escape with extremely valuable information and ended up here because of Yuka-chan! Oh, and I’m the daughter of a God!”

“…Huh?”

“What in the…”

“U-Uhm…”

“Eh? Eeeh!?”

Sora, Itsuki, Ren, and Yukai reacted respectively. Chouka’s introduction was as chaotic as it could get. Ryosei explained his situation with Chouka to Ren and Yukai before, but that wasn’t nearly as destructive as her current explanation. They could sense that she romanticized her story to some degree with her pride overflowing to every single one of them. But she was basically saying that she made a contract with Ryosei in order to cooperate with him, got transported to the base of some organization, retrieved information from them, then ended her introduction by adding that she was the daughter of a god… Even after being silent for a little over a minute to try and comprehend everything she said, they still couldn’t help but shut down due to the flood of questions drowning their minds at the moment.

“Say something already!!”

Unable to bear the dead silence after her introduction, Chouka shouted in frustration. After that, the group spent the whole time asking questions about Chouka’s explanation until they were all caught up with everything that happened to them. That included Chouka’s true identity, her contract with Ryosei, Black Rose, and as well as the Spirit Smith Raqeav. She tried to explain what Raqeav told them, but after everything that happened, failed to recall much of Ryosei’s conversation with him aside from terms such as Judgement Day, Ambassadors, and Lost Maiden.

She tried to recall the names he mentioned but only ended up saying names that no one could comprehend. The confident face she showed when said them almost fooled them into actually believing those names to be true.

After everything was over, Ren was about to expound on the subject of ambassadors, but just before she could start, Ryosei finally came back and told them…

“Sorry for taking so long! For now, follow me, it’s something important.”

“What!? Wait, where’s your explanation!?”

It seemed like Itsuki was never able to move on about the explanation Ryosei promised him. Well, everyone present agreed with him and only stared at Ryosei with anticipation. Even after everyone’s talk with each other, there were clearly missing factors that no one could explain, namely the details that Chouka failed to remember. So, they wanted Ryosei to provide them.

“Don’t worry, I’m going to do exactly just that… Well, ac But first, we need to get to a certain place.”

**237 – Herald to a New Generation**

The group then followed Ryosei through the castle halls, weaving through the corners, they arrived at a familiar location to Sora and Itsuki.

“This is…”

“It’s that Freda person’s room isn’t it?”

Itsuki finished Sora’s words. Ryosei opened the door and welcomed everyone to what seemed to be an audience room. It was mostly empty except for the curtain that was supposed to cover whoever is supposed to sit on the other side.

“Come on, through here.”

Ryosei led them past the curtain and headed for a door that led to a stairwell going deep underground. Ryosei continued downward while the other five followed him from behind. Yukai and Chouka anxiously looked around the place, seemingly intimidated by the construction along with how deep the stairwell went. But after long, they finally arrived at the exit where abundant nature awaited them.

All five of them looked around in awe. Even Sora and Itsuki didn’t know about this place. There were familiar plants, ones they didn’t recognize, and others that were clearly not from this world. They raised their heads where there should have been some kind of ceiling, but instead of a solid wall, they found the endless blue sky where the white clouds calmly floated above them with the sun peering through them.

“Over here.”

As they were trying to comprehend what they were seeing, Ryosei mercilessly interrupted their train of thought and urged them to follow him through the forest. The others obediently trailed behind him until they reached the face of the cliff where there was a flight of stairs led upwards by the waterfall. Staring blankly at the absurd number of stairs, Itsuki let out a complaint.

“We’re not actually climbing all of this right!?”

They climbed it, ignoring Itsuki’s incessant complaints all the while. It seemed like one of the cruel training drills Kosuke always threw at Itsuki, but the others didn’t mind the travel much since they were enjoying talking to each other and passed the time it took them to arrive at the top. The only ones that truly suffered were Itsuki who ended up yapping the whole time and Sora who had to listen to his every complaint.

But then, when they got to the top, every single one of them had the same reaction—silenced as they took in the sight before them. Unlike on the ground where the most dominant feature was nature, here, the most dominant feature was water as patches of water flowed down the ceiling into a large lake that fell even further downwards, which then served as the waterfall that they saw when they first got there.

It was a waterscape where pillars of flowing water of all sizes filled a large lake. In the center of that lake was a body of land where a large platform lay. On that small island were the Konjou Clan’s chief and Freda who stood silently on the platform as they awaited Ryosei and the others’ arrival.

Ryosei walked to the island using the rectangular patches of stone that protruded above the water. The others followed silently, being careful not to slip. Ryosei stood beside Freda and faced the others where they all lined up in front of them. After scanning the people that arrived, Ryosei finally broke the silence.

“As you may or may not know, four days ago, me—Konjou Ryosei and Yukou Senkyo faced an enemy that trapped us in Zerid.”

“Yukou… Senkyo!?”

The one that disrupted the silence from the audience was Ren, clinging to Senkyo’s name. Everyone turned to her, but Ryosei didn’t let that disturb his speech and decided to continue.

“Yes. I left him alone while he was recovering from the fight to find a way to get back to Earth. But now, after my talk with Freda, I now realize that it was the enemy’s mental attack that made me think it was best to leave him. We currently do not know Senkyo’s situation, but at the very least, we still know he is alive using Freda’s powers. After traveling through the Spirit World with Chouka, I met a Spirit Smith named Raqeav who told me about the ambassadors of the past—the people who are tasked by the gods to make peace with the other worlds they are connected to…”

Ryosei explained to everyone the information he got from Yuu in the past. How the world was originally one large planet called Primo which was filled with chaos due to the ideal worlds of three gods: Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, mingled and overwrote each other, creating pandemonium and ceasing any sort of life. Because of this, they used their powers to divide Primo into three different worlds: Zerid, Earth, and the Spirit Realm. He continued about how it was there was the problem of rifts appearing randomly and sending beings to other worlds, creating a panic. And their solution to that was the Ambassadors, people who are chosen from each world and are sent to others in order to make peace. If everyone understands that otherworlders aren’t a threat, then at the very least, it would lessen the danger of being sent to another world.

However, what stood before that ambition was another god that appeared out of nowhere and killed Hades, the God of the Spirit Realm. Because of this, he took that chance to erase the efforts of the previous ambassadors by erasing the memories of residents of Earth and the Spirit Realm. Making them forget about otherworlders from ever coming to make peace. The only people that were spared from this curse are the people who were in Zerid at the time, who were protected by the efforts of the ambassadors and the remaining two gods.

The others listened to Ryosei’s story, their faces twisting into different expressions as they were filled with different emotions as they listened to him. They frequently showed surprise, anger, sadness, amazement, and confusion. All except for Ren who showed a stern expression the whole time, and Chouka who looked like she was only trying her best to stay still.

“…Then, as to why I’m telling you all this, is because I think that the powers of the ambassadors are needed to save Senkyo.”

Ryosei announced as he finished filling in everybody about the lore of the world and the actions of the gods. Sora, Itsuki, and Yukai looked at him in confusion, while Ren and Chouka nodded lightly in understanding. Seeing this, Itsuki frowned and furrowed his brows in frustration. As if to catch up to the others, he quickly thought of something.

“T-Then what? How are you going to find these ambassadors of the past, huh?”

Itsuki shot the question at Ryosei and ended with a satisfied expression without even waiting for his reply. Unfortunately, his light celebration was quickly shot down by Ryosei’s next words.

“No, that’s not it.”

“H-Huh? Then what!?”

The others stayed silent as they watched Itsuki and Ryosei’s exchange. Although Itsuki was wrong and two of the five people in the audience seemed to understand where the situation was going, none of them insulted his efforts to figure out the situation. After all, Itsuki was actually asking important questions and progressing the conversation.

“I’ll tell you. But first, I would like to mention the names of the previous ambassadors to you all. Do with this information what you will, but this will be a good point of reference for you all to know for the future.”

“What?”

Ignoring Itsuki’s confused response, Ryosei continued.

“Ambassadors of Zerid, the Hfixesi: Firel, Nwen, Draui, Msena, and Kroiat.”

As expected, there was no reaction as no one recognized any names. Although, Chouka had an excited face the whole time as if anticipating something.

“Ambassadors of the Spirit Realm, the Di manes: Yuuki, Hana, Shigo, Mei, and Hiroto.”

“Woo!! Yuuki and Mei! I know them, I know them!”

Chouka shouted cheerfully in complete contrast to the tense atmosphere that surrounded them. She was acting like a mother whose child won first place in some big event. Even Ryosei couldn’t help but let out an exasperated sigh at her actions, but still continued.

“And finally, Ambassadors of Earth, the Heroes: Konjou Masao, Yukou Yuuto, Akira Leo, Honshou Mirai, and… Yutei Katashi.”

Sora, Itsuki, Chouka, and Yukai let out surprised expressions while Ren stayed the same as always. For Sora, Itsuki, and Chouka, they were probably most surprised about how there were so many names that they recognized, but for Yukai, she was staring blankly at Ryosei as she heard the name of her father get mentioned.

“N-No way…”

Yukai whispered under her breath. Catching her confusion, Ryosei dropped the formal appearance and told her.

“Yukai-chan, we’ll talk about it later. I’ll be there.”

A light smile appeared on her face and nodded slightly in response. She appreciated his concern for her, but still couldn’t help but look down at the ground in deep thought. Ren also saw this and made a difficult expression. But still, they both knew that this had to continue.

“As for how we plan on saving Senkyo, she will be explaining everything from here.”

Ryosei pointed to the woman beside him, to Freda. Everyone besides Yukai turned to her and prepared to listen.

**238 – The Maiden’s Call**

“I am Freda, The Lost Maiden.”

Sora and Itsuki threw her a confused look while Ren and Chouka nodded in satisfaction. Sora and Itsuki only heard of the title “Lost Maiden” earlier that day, so they didn’t quite understand the weight it brought but the other two were clearly the opposite. They wanted to ask Freda to explain further, but before they could, she shot them another question.

“Before I start with anything, I have a question for you all.”

Freda said as she scanned the audience before continuing.

“What kind of future do you want to have?”

“Future?”

Sora parroted Freda’s words, asking her to explain further.

“Yes. Your ideal. A vision of the future where you have achieved your goals, obtained happiness, or maybe simply one where you are satisfied with being alive. Anything at all.”

They understood what she wanted from them, but no one knew how to answer it. She was asking for the future, a time uncertain where any plans could easily crumble due to the simplest mistakes. Should they be answering her while considering its feasibility? Or maybe they should be answering using the first thing that popped into their heads? The silence continued as they deliberated on how to answer her question. But among them, there was a single person who didn’t look as troubled as everyone else with the question. They simply stayed quiet and closed their eyes as if confirming her thoughts. Then, she spoke.

“A future where I’ve righted the wrongs of the past.”

Ren spoke confidently as she faced Freda, staring her straight in the eyes as she answered. The others stared at her surprised at her assertive reply. It was short and concise, completely different from what they were crafting in their heads. In response to Ren’s answer, Freda nodded in satisfaction.

“I see.”

After seeing how easily she accepted her answer, the others felt like their worries were complexly meaningless. There was no need to go into too much detail, she just wanted an answer that was true to their hearts. Realizing that, Sora was next to speak.

“To me, I think that I’d just want to have a future where everyone important to me is alive and well. If everyone else is happy then I’m happy, but still, I’d like it if we all got along too…”

Sora trailed off as if recalling a recent memory. Freda nodded, hearing his true thoughts. Meanwhile, Itsuki’s face twisted in frustration after everyone was getting ahead of him. Turning to face Freda, he asked.

“D-Do we seriously have to answer this bullshit?”

“Watanabe-kun, it would do you good to share your thoughts even once and a while. Also, stop being rude to everyone. I’ll have to talk with Sakurai-san about this.”

Yousuke caught his question instead, making Itsuki click his tongue. His eyes wandered away from the people in front of him and spoke reluctantly.

“I-I just want to protect someone, that’s all!”

He said as we scratched the back of his neck awkwardly, thinking of the person in question in his mind. Freda nodded, satisfied with his rough answer.

“Oh, oh! I want a future where everyone is happy!”

Chouka answered excitedly as she raised her arm to let everyone know that she wanted to be next to answer. Well, she answered immediately after she raised her arm without waiting for anyone to respond so it was meaningless. Freda nodded, hearing her earnest wish for joy.

“…I, u-umm…”

After everyone answered her, all that was left was Yukai. Being the last one to answer and the only reason why the conversation wasn’t progressing, she felt the pressure and began panicking. It wasn’t like she was doing it on purpose, she just couldn’t think of an answer she was satisfied with. After a few more seconds, she answered.

“I-I… would want a future where everyone is safe and alive!”

She shouted, forcing the words out of her throat. But then, unlike how she responded to the others, Freda asked her another question.

“Are you certain about this?”

“U-Umm… Yes!”

“I understand.”

Freda nodded, hearing Yukai’s response. Then, she faced the audience as a whole.

“Now that I have heard your thoughts, I will now move on to the main topic. Due to the incident of the last generation, Judgement Day, the day when all ambassadors are chosen and are blessed with the powers to venture into other worlds, was commenced immediately after ending the last generation. Normally, that would mean that every ambassador chosen is immediately given their blessings and is tasked by the gods. However, that would mean that ambassadors will be unprepared and are nowhere near capable of handling their blessings. That is the reason why I was created. The Lost Maiden, it is my duty to serve as a catalyst and hold the powers of the ambassadors until it is time for them to receive their blessings. I have a unique connection with every single ambassador and can give them their blessings no matter the time. So, I think that there is no better time than now to bless some of the current ambassadors.”

Freda announced, emphasizing her will to share the blessings of the gods. Sora, Yukai, and even Itsuki finally caught on to what she wanted to do, and the reason they were sent to hear all of this. Itsuki was particularly proud to have finally realized her intentions as he crossed his arms and nodded approvingly with a smile on his face. Then, Freda continued.

“Of the people present, I will now be announcing the ambassadors chosen by the gods!”

Itsuki’s smile widened after Freda’s words matched his prediction, his excitement comparable to Chouka’s energy as she lightly swayed her body in anticipation. Ryosei and Ren kept their cool expressions as they awaited Freda to continue. Meanwhile, Sora and Yukai had confused expressions, perhaps not keeping up with the conversation or simply having a hard time believing the major event that was happening before them. With varied reactions, Freda announced.

“The Di Manes: Konjou Ryosei and Chouka!”

“…”

“Yes!! I did it! I’m an ambassador!!!”

Ryosei simply nodded, expecting his name to be announced. He went to talk to Freda before they were called here, so no one questioned his reaction. Although, Chouka’s reaction was the exact opposite, as she jumped for joy, cheering that her name was called. But unlike the other times she happily collected attention, no one minded her this time. They were too focused on Freda to react to her actions.

“The Heroes: Yamamoto Sora, Watanabe Itsuki, and Akira Ren!”

“E-Ehhh???”

“Hell yeah!”

“Huh…?”

Sora couldn’t do anything but let out a confused howl while Itsuki cheered the same as Chouka. In contrast to their reactions, Ren, who kept a cool expression this whole time, tilted her head as her face twisted in confusion. She shifted her attention from Freda to the girl beside her, Yukai.

Her mouth was agape as she heard Freda’s announcement. Her name was not mentioned. No one ever told her that everyone present was an ambassador, so she shouldn’t have expected to be one. But after hearing that her father was actually an ambassador and the fact that she was present at this major event, the implications told her that the possibility of her name being called was high. But after everything that happened, her name was not mentioned.

Confused by this, Ren asked Freda in Yukai’s place.

“Freda-san, are you certain that there are no other ambassadors present?”

Freda takes a quick pause, thinking of the answer to give her.

“There is one more ambassador I have yet to mention.”

“Really? Who is it?”

“The Hero, Saito Touma.”

**239 – The Weight of the Title**

“WHAT!? TOUMA-KUN!?”

Ren was the one to ask her the question, but Sora shouted in surprise before she could even process the name Freda mentioned.

“Yes, Saito Touma is one of the current ambassadors. You may have conflicting feelings about this after the recent incident with Saito-san, but that does not change that he is one of the ambassadors.”

“W-Wha…?”

As Freda responded to Sora’s surprise, Ren couldn’t help but become even more confused. She turned to Yukai. Appreciating Ren’s efforts to speak for her, she simply smiled at her and gave a word of thanks.

“It’s all right. Thank you.”

“…”

Ren fell into silence as she was forced to drop the subject. If Yukai didn’t want her to press the subject, then she had to right to. Thinking that, she forced her expression back to its usual calm appearance, but couldn’t help leaking some degree of disappointment.

“To you ambassadors present, I must make sure that you all understand the responsibilities of this title. As Konjou-san explained earlier, the task of ambassadors is to make peace with other worlds, but due to the last generation’s incident, this has been changed. Currently, the task imposed on you by the gods is… nothing.”

Confused murmurs begin popping around the group everyone but Ren and Yukai tried to make sense of Freda’s words.

“Usually, ambassadors are unable to refuse the tasks the gods imposed on them. However, as this generation’s Judgement Day was made in irregular circumstances, the gods were not able to impose anything to your will. In other words, the power you will hold when I bless you will follow your will and yours alone. You will be able to use those powers as you please without limit. You can use them to bring misfortune to others or help them thrive. You may even forget this ever happened and refuse to use these powers to return to a normal life. The choice is yours.”

The room suddenly fell silent. After realizing the true weight of the title of “ambassador” everyone stopped to think. As they did so, Freda continued.

“Whatever you do with your blessings is yours to control. But at the very least, there is one request I have you all to do. Go to Zerid and bring back Yukou Senkyo and Hisho Yuu.”

The ambassadors looked at each other, gauging their will to accept her request. As it seemed like everyone present was familiar with Senkyo, no one had any qualms about taking on the challenge. But Sora and Itsuki had conflicted faces when they heard Yuu’s name in the list of people to bring back. In the silence, Itsuki threw a question at Freda.

“Why? What happens if we don’t save them?”

“Hey, Watanabe-kun!”

Sora snapped at his question.

“Chill out! I’m just asking! I don’t mind saving Shittaku, but why do we have to get that shorty vampire? She betrayed us, right!?”

“Oh, that’s what it was… You need to be more careful with your words!”

“Like I care!”

Before the two began bickering again, Freda kindly told them the reason.

“That is because, if the enemy gets their hands on Yukou-san, Zeus, the God of Zerid, will perish.”

“What!?”

Everyone except for Ryosei and Ren let out surprised gasps at the sudden declaration. Finding their surprise understandable, she explained.

“That is because the enemy has the power to kill gods just like how they did Hades. But to do that, they need someone who is directly connected to the god. And The Hfixesi: Yukou Senkyo and Hisho Yuu, are examples of those people. Having even one of them will be the key to Zeus’ death.”

“No way… that traitor is an ambassador!?”

“Whether you like it or not, the fact that Hisho Yuu is chosen as an ambassador remains true.”

Freda declared. Ren and Chouka didn’t know Yuu, but it was obvious from their exchange that she was once an ally that betrayed them in some way. Sora and Itsuki kept silent, trying to accept that the person who endangered Senkyo in the first place was someone they needed to save and work with in the future. Meanwhile, Yukai could only be confused as he suddenly heard that one of the people she knows was a traitor.

“Please, I request your aid. No one will know how detrimental the loss of another god will be.”

Everyone began to calm down after hearing Freda’s heartfelt request as she bowed to them. A few seconds of silence passed, and finally, Yousuke spoke out.

“Ambassadors! Have you forgotten your ideals!? To right the wrongs of the past, to see that your loved ones are alive and well, to protect those important to you, to reach a future where everyone is happy, do you think any of these ideals of yours will come true when the world is steadily crumbling!? Some of you may think that you don’t need to hear me say this and that you were already planning to accept Freda-sama’s request, but do you truly think that naïve mindset will be enough to carry the title of ambassador!? You all have different ideals, and different futures that you want to live in, but we can only have one. What do you think will happen if these overlap each other!? What you all need the most is not power, but unity and understanding! You must all understand that currently, there is one single objective to reach your ideals: Bring back Yukou Senkyo and Hisho Yuu. To the ambassadors under the Konjou Clan, you are all ordered to return to this location to go to Zerid by the end of this week! You don’t have to worry about your upcoming tests, we will cover them. What we need the most from all of you is the skill and confidence to take on the challenge before you! As for those unrelated to the clan, you are welcome to come here on the said day to join the group. That is all!”

The ambassadors tensed their expressions as they listened to Yousuke’s speech. As they realize the weight of the title bestowed upon them, they all stopped to think of their future actions as they leave the area. And Yukai, who could only watch everything that happened, walked away with a depressed face.

**240 – Commitment**

“Hey, how are you holding up?”

“O-Oh, Ryosei-nii-san.”

After returning from Freda’s Eternal Paradise and leaving her room, everyone separated ways to ponder about what they just learned. All that was left were Chouka, Ryosei, and Yukai, who was frozen still in front of Freda’s room as if in a daze. Ryosei had a clue as to what was bothering her and called out to her.

“It’s nothing.”

“That won’t do. I invited you to that meeting even though I knew you might react like this. It’s about your father, isn’t it?”

“…Yes. Can’t hide anything from you, can I?”

Yukai conceded in hiding her façade after Ryosei hit the bull’s eye. She gave up rather easily and she didn’t even sound reluctant to be honest with him. In fact, it felt like she was relieved that he guessed correctly. Ryosei didn’t miss that.

“I told you before, didn’t I? I’ll be there for you. You don’t need to keep everything to yourself anymore.”

“I see… Hehe, you’re right.”

Her lips curled up to a smile as she heard Ryosei’s words. She didn’t have to carry her burden by herself anymore. She wasn’t alone, not anymore. When she realized that, she couldn’t help but let out a light giggle.

“My father was a good man. He’s hard-working, is kind to others, always finds a way to make others laugh, and change their mood completely when they’re sad… at least, that’s what my mom always told me.”

Sensing the heavy change in the tone of her voice, Ryosei prepared himself. Even Chouka, who looked like she wanted to say something the entire time, froze and stayed silent as Yukai continued.

“I’ve never met my father. He wasn’t there for any of my birthdays, not even on the day I was born. It has always been mom and me, and no one else. But even so… mom talked about him every chance she could, praising him and telling me stories of the many things he’s done. When I heard that, then I thought, maybe, just maybe, he’ll come back to us, and the only reason he was gone was that something important was keeping him from us. But as we waited, and waited, and waited, until mom was bedridden in the hospital, he never came back. I gave up on the idea of him coming back into our lives years ago. Honestly, I hate him. Leaving us to fend for ourselves, without supporting us as a father should. Even if he came back now, I would never forgive him. If he was as great as the man mom made him out to be, then why did he leave in the first place? But… But even so, even when I complained to mom about him, she would only make a sad face. She didn’t deny what I said, but she also didn’t agree with them. Even after everything, she still had some trust left for that man… I couldn’t believe it. I thought mom was just desperate… but now… now that I heard that he was a Hero… an ambassador sent to another world to make peace… I… I…!”

Yukai told her story normally at the start, making her thoughts form into words to tell Ryosei, completely unlike how she was when she faced her mother again for the first time in six months. But as she neared the end, her composure faltered. It was as if her mind and mouth forgot how to communicate with each other, and the words she wanted to say got stuck in her throat. She tried to force them out until all she could do was shout a single word. But before she pushed herself too hard, Ryosei placed his hand on her head and began petting her.

“Since you hated yourself too, your father was the only other person that you recognized to be worse that you. But now, that might not be the case. I’m not going to say that I’ve experienced the same as you did, but if you could trust me, I want you to know that I understand. Even imagining it now, it’s scary how real that situation could have been for me if I found someone to despise.”

She nodded silently, her pained roars were reduced to meek noises. She felt hurt but didn’t cry.

“In that situation, I wouldn’t say that he wasn’t at fault. I think your feelings are justified, and I’m not saying this just to make you feel better. Even if he was chosen to be an ambassador, it still doesn’t take out the fact that he left you two. Even if the purpose is good or bad, he wasn’t responsible. But you aren’t satisfied with that, are you?”

She nodded again.

“Then how about this? I’ll find your father for you.”

“H-Huh…?”

Yukai removed her eyes from the floor and turned them to Ryosei. She let out a confused noise, but couldn’t think of anything to say.

“You just need to see him, right? These ‘what ifs’ and superficial words won’t be enough. If I find him and bring him to you, then you’ll finally be able to calm down. And if it turns out that you won’t be able to meet him again, then we can grieve. I’ll be there for you, and so will your mother.”

“Wh-What…? Mom will…? What do you mean, Ryosei-nii-san?”

Her eyes widened. How was he able to say that? That she would be able to grieve along with her mother. She was currently at the hospital, unconscious. She couldn’t wake up, let alone grieve. She felt like those words should have angered her. They should have felt like insults that were underestimating her mother’s condition. But they didn’t. Contrary to that, she felt relief. She didn’t know why, but she could feel the truth in his words. That in time, she would be able to be with her mother again.

“…”

“A-Ah, It’s a bit too early for that, isn’t it? Those tears should be saved for her, not me.”

With a blank face, a single tear crawled down her face, and then came others that followed. Not wanting Ryosei to see her face, she buried it in his clothes and talked to him in a muffled voice, spaced with uneven pauses to hold back her voice from truly crying.

“Y… You mean… it…? Mom… Mom is…? She’s… She’s… waking up…?”

As she asked for confirmation, Ryosei turned to Chouka. She didn’t quite know what to do in that situation and just stood around. She had multiple urges to leave, but every time she tried to, Ryosei would glare, rooting her in place. When she received the sudden signal from him, she didn’t quite understand what to do, but after summoning Kuro Yaiba behind Yukai, where she couldn’t see, Chouka finally understood and acted accordingly.

“Yes, it’s possible! With my mom’s help, there’s nothing she won’t be able to cure!”

Chouka claimed excitedly. She wasn’t actually sure what Yukai’s mother’s situation is, but since she heard that she was in the hospital, she figured it was related to life and death. It was nothing that her mother, a god of life, couldn’t be able to fix.

“I see… thank you… thank you…!”

As Yukai thanked them wholeheartedly, Ryosei felt a little bad. He purposefully directed the conversation from her father to his mother. He didn’t want to leave her with a heavy load in her heart, so she told him about how he could save her mother. He couldn’t allow her to carry the stress of worrying about both her mother and father. So for now, he relived her worries about her mother.

However, in truth, he wasn’t sure if a god of life will be able to cure her mother. After seeing her mother’s state, it wasn’t an exaggeration to describe it as a manifestation of death trying to maul her soul, but the fact that she was able to survive was nothing short of a miracle. But, there must have been something at work. Something that was making that… thing attack her. And something that was keeping it from killing her. He wasn’t sure if Chouka’s mother could cure her, but he knew there was a way. He could feel it. He didn’t know why, but it felt as if he could cut down the curse with his blade. This was his way of committing to this. Some day, Yukai and her mother will be able to talk again.

**241 – Diverging Paths**

“So that’s what you’re planning on using our contract for!”

Chouka said conclusively as she pointed her finger at Ryosei. A few minutes earlier, they separated with Yukai after Ryosei said everything he wanted to say. They had to go back to the Spirit Realm and get to The Garden, Chouka’s home, as per the contract. Visiting the Konjou Clan was nothing more than a detour after being forcefully summoned to Earth by Yukai. Chouka didn’t mind that. To her, this was a benefit as she found out that she was actually one of the Di Manes for the current generation of ambassadors. But right now, there was only one thing that was most important of all—asserting dominance.

“I see now! So you entered that contract with her in mind! I’m not saying that it's wrong, but you shouldn’t let your emotions get the best of you. If I was a bad kid, I could have trapped you with that contract. Either phrase my words to make you do something different or assassinate you when you were vulnerable. The possibilities were endless! Are you sure you can continue without straightening those emotions of yours?”

“Ok then, I just won’t interact with you anymore after this.”

“H-Huuuuh? I-Is that so…? Well, I-I’m a Cool Lady, so I won’t need your help in the future anymore!”

“That so? Then I guess I’ll leave you out in our missions as ambassadors.”

“W-What!? You can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re ambassadors! We’re supposed to be a team remember?”

“Oh? I thought you said you didn’t need my help? Are you saying you were wrong?”

“R-Ryo-chan…! Why are you being so spiteful!?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I’m just giving you a taste of your own medicine.”

“K-Krgh…!”

Unable to keep up her composure, Chouka lost.

“K-Kya!”

“…!”

While the two were busy fooling around, a black figure suddenly appeared before them, making Chouka scream in surprise and Ryosei summon Kuro Yaiba. It appeared in mid-air and expanded by the second. As the two warily watched it, they noticed that it was taking the shape of a humanoid. This was familiar, and Ryosei was first to notice. This was what it would look like to others every time he manifested on Earth. Seeing the similarities, he concluded that someone was manifesting in front of them.

With their guard up, they watched as the figure slowly took shape. And surprisingly, he knew this person. He had curly hair that reached his shoulders, a jet-black jacket with matching boots decorated with skulls, chains that hung on his waistband, and a large scythe hanging on his back. The only difference was that he wasn’t wearing the skull mask he was wearing before, exposing his excellent facial features. As he finally appeared, he announced.

“I’m here to pick you two up, young lady, young prince.”

“The god of death!?”

Ryosei shouted.

**…………**

The days passed and arrived at the end of the week. Itsuki was alone walking through Freda’s Eternal Paradise, heading to where Ryosei took them a few days ago. He had his black Gi on, the battle gear of the Konjou Clan’s brutes. In the past few days, he didn’t make contact with any other hunter or ambassador. Instead, he simply spent his time lazing around his house. Since he wasn’t required to take the tests, his parents couldn’t force him to go to school. His sister, Ichika, would spout complaints about his inactivity but he always said that he was doing something. Of course, no one believed him.

The sound of water smashing into water greeted him as he arrived at the location. Avoiding the puddles of water sprawled across the place, he headed to the small island in the middle of everything. Sora, who was wearing a black cloak, the battle gear of enchanters, and Ren, who was wearing her usual school uniform, were already there standing in front of Freda and Yousuke just like the other day, but with additions. Beside the two stood Yamazaki Dai, the Konjou Clan’s strongest hunter, Sakurai Yosuke, one of the strongest elders and Itsuki’s current teacher, and Shimizu Yoshiko, disciple of the strongest enchanter in the clan’s history and Senkyo’s current teacher, all of them wearing their respective class’ battle gear.

Itsuki greeted them with a confused face, wondering why they were there. And as to confuse him more, Yousuke announced.

“Now that everyone is here, we will now explain the details of this operation.”

“Wait, wait! What do you mean? Ryosei and that kid aren’t here yet!”

Itsuki complained, to which Yousuke provided an explanation.

“The Di Manes Konjou Ryosei and Chouka will not be joining us. Currently, they are on a different operation from this one, due to unexpected factors, they will be tackling a different problem that only they can take on as spirits.”

“What the hell…?”

He understood but wasn’t satisfied by that. Yousuke ignored Itsuki and proceeded to the main subject.

“For this operation, our main goal is to find and bring back Yukou Senkyo and Hisho Yuu to prevent our enemies from killing Zeus, the god of Zerid. We will be using this summoning circle to send you all to Zerid.”

Yousuke tapped his feet and pointed to the platform they were standing on. They couldn’t see it properly from the front, but looking at it from the sky, the platform had a large circle engraved in it, but that was all it was. A large circle. Even if they had a bird’s eye view of the platform, most people would doubt it was even a magic circle.

“Yamazaki Dai, Sakurai Yosuke, and Shimizu Yoshiko will be accompanying you all. We wanted to send more reinforcements, but we didn’t want to overload Freda-san with too much burden, so we will just send you our most powerful forces.”

“I’m supposed to be retired though…”

“A-Ahaha… I’m glad you were kind enough to accept our request, Sakurai-dono.”

Yousuke could only laugh awkwardly at Yosuke’s sudden statement. As an elder, he was exempt from any further missions from the clan, but because of his power, Yousuke sent a request for him to join. Since it was a request instead of an order, he was allowed to seek his help, and it all depended on the receiver on whether or not they would accept. Thankfully, Kosuke accepted, but it seemed like he was intent on reminding the clan chief of the favor he was doing for him.

“Will now begin activating the summoning circle. To all of those participating in the mission, please stand inside the circle.”

**242 – Fear**

Itsuki, Sora, and Ren stepped onto the platform and into the circle at Freda’s announcement. Dai, Kosuke, and Yoshiko stayed on the platform while Freda and Yousuke stepped off. Seeing that everyone was in position, Freda clasped her hands and began mumbling something in a strange language. As she was doing that, Yousuke spoke out.

“Freda-sama is our trump card. With her, we have the upper hand over the enemy. As they are unaware of the existence of the Lost Maiden, they will misunderstand the appearance of ambassadors as the day Judgement Day commenced. This will allow us to hide other ambassadors from them. Namely, Yukou-kun and Hisho-kun. Use this information as a weapon and spread the news that ambassadors have arrived. Along with that, never say or do anything that will lead to exposing the existence of the Lost Maiden and her identity.”

As if to signal the end of Yousuke’s speech, a pillar of opaque blue light shot out from the circle and confined the people inside it.

“Please do not leave the circle. After a few minutes, the circle will automatically transport every one of you to the summoning circle in the middle of Yuwokrn, the continent of Zerid where Yukou-san will be on. You must gather information on their possible whereabouts and find them. Konjou-san told me that their last known location was near the Border City Iqanlr. That is our only clue.”

Everyone nodded at Freda’s words.

“Before getting summoned to Zerid, I will bless you with the power of ambassadors. However, you will not be able to make full use of them until you obtain your respective Divine Weapons. Usually, the gods will give them to you without trouble, but due to Hades’ death only a few new weapons are forged, and the rest of you will have to find the Divine Weapons of the previous generation.”

“What!? What’s up with that!? How are we supposed to find these things in a different world!? We don’t even know what they look like, who knows where they’re at!”

Itsuki boomed as he complained to Freda, but she was already expecting this.

“Worry not. By becoming ambassadors, you will all gain god’s blessing called Fated Winds. This will guide you all to your respective Divine Weapons. They can come in many forms of coincidences, noises, images, and other signs, but all you have to do is trust your instincts, and you will be guided by god.”

“That sounds convenient. If its using instincts then wouldn’t you find the first one, Watanabe-kun?”

“Well, guess you’re right.”

Sora added, convincing Itsuki that this was in his favor, putting an end to any other possible complaints. Seeing as no one else had questions, Freda continued.

“After giving all of you your powers, I will lose my physical body. But this will be beneficial for us, as I will be able to watch over all of you and give you all your powers in the best possible moments. Please relay this to Yukou-san.”

“Affirmative.”

Everyone responded in understanding. Silence then filled the atmosphere, leaving only the background noises of water smashing and flowing in their surroundings and the ruffling of clothes as everyone scanned themselves, making sure that they have the items they needed for the mission. Then, Freda announced, breaking the silence and sending everyone to attention.

“Ten seconds before the transport. Everyone, may luck be with you.”

Everyone nodded in response, but then something happened. All of the sudden, Itsuki ran toward the edge of the circle.

“H-Huh!? Wait, what!? My body…! I can’t control it!”

“What!?”

Everyone exclaimed in surprised voices, but the first to act was Ren, who used the pole of her spear to knock Itsuki back to the center of the circle. He took the hit, but he stood his ground and didn’t move from his spot.

“Everyone, stop him!”

Seeing that her attempt was ineffective, she shouted for help. At that time, Itsuki gripped her spear and launched a punch to her gut, but just before she was hit, Ren let go of her spear and jumped backward. Itsuki threw away the spear and resumed his dash out of the circle.

“Anyone! Anyone at all, stop me!!”

Itsuki shouted in a panic.

“What a handful student you are.”

Sakurai was next to block his path. With him, there would be no problems since all he had to do was stall him for three more seconds. But then, he missed.

“…!”

No… even Kosuke didn’t expect this. As he was about to secure Itsuki’s arm, his hand passed through his body. Right when he thought he somehow missed, Itsuki rushed forward sending his whole body through Kosuke crossing through him as if he was a ghost. With no one else to stop him, all that was left for him was to leave the circle. But then, just as he was about to reach it a scream resonated in his ears.

“Stoooop!!!”

“Kgh…!”

Sora came from the side and tackled him, pushing Itsuki to the ground and locking him in place. Itsuki struggled, but with only half a second left, there was no possible way for him to escape. But as a last struggle, he raised his fist and threw it to the ground, making contact with the edge of the magic circle and creating a crack. Everyone saw that and paled, but before they could do anything about it, the opaque blue light swirled and solidified, consuming everyone inside it.

A few seconds passed, and all that was left was Yousuke, staring blankly at the platform where something alarming just happened right before his eyes. The six people he sent to Zerid were gone, and Freda, who was the only person he could ask about it was gone, just as she said would happen.

The magic circle cracked, but he didn’t know what dangers that caused for them. Agonizing in his lack of knowledge to comprehend the situation, he could only say one thing…

“So this is how Hashimoto felt, huh?”