**415 – The Garden**

Surprise is a strange emotion. It often feels like a sharp turn that abruptly changes from one emotion to another like how a person would feel fear when something scares them or how a person would become happy when someone surprises them with something they like. Other times, the emotion prolongs in some situations to process the information that surprised them.

“Shigoooo, I’m not in trouble am I?”

“Who knows~? It’s not my place to decide, Young Lady.”

Then there are situations where it’s hard to tell if a person is still surprised or just plain confused, conflicted perhaps.

“Ehhh?? Come oooon!! There’s no way you came to pick me up without Mommy’s orders! Was she mad?”

“Hmm, but the fun lies in finding out, is it not?”

“You’re always so meeeeeaaan!!”

This was one such situation that Konjou Ryosei was currently faced with. A situation so bizarre that he could only have a single thought in mind…

*\*What.\**

Turning the hands of time a few minutes back, Ryosei just parted from everyone in the Konjou Clan after he explained the current situation with Senkyo. The event ended with Freda, the mysterious elf who assisted the Konjou clan for the past seven years, revealing to them the truth about the incident that happened between the three worlds along with the identities of some of the current ambassadors. The event had a certain bystander present, Yutei Yukai, the daughter of one of the previous Heroes. She also happened to be the one person Ryosei saved before dying in a traffic accident seven years ago, and the only person he had a mysterious connection with. Freda had declared that she had her present just so that she knew the truth about her father. The big news shook her to her core but even Ryosei thought it was something that needed to happen eventually.

After comforting Yukai of her troubles, he left her in the care of the clan to escort her home while he set off to bring Chouka, the spirit girl he rescued in the spirit world, back to her home, The Garden. She was a girl with an emerald bob cut and wore a white dress over her body. Their meeting was unusual, to say the least. After Senkyo, Shiro, and Ryosei got trapped in Zerid, Ryosei took it upon himself to find a way back to Earth. In his search, he came across a lone girl who was a target of three assassins, which he made quick work of after weighing his options of saving the girl or using her as a bargaining chip to get information from the three crooks. He kept telling himself that it was a viable option for someone in his situation, but in the end, he couldn’t let injustice pass and followed his heart. That was how he met the spirit girl standing by his side at the moment. Meanwhile, even further to that side was… a god of death.

After parting ways with Yukai, Ryosei and Chouka were intercepted by a handsome man with curly hair that reached his shoulders, a jet-black jacket with matching boots decorated with skulls, chains that hung from his waistband, and a large scythe hanging on his back. He was the exact same person that Senkyo, no, the Divine Soul of Spirits summoned when they were faced against Fulgur, the Lightning Leader of END. The Grim Reaper.

“Young Prince, what do you think of The Garden so far?”

Death, himself, asked Ryosei.

“U-Uhh… It’s… definitely amazing…”

Currently, Ryosei, Chouka, and the God of Death were walking down a long hallway with rays of gentle sunlight piercing through the large, ornate windows and reflecting off the ivory walls and porcelain decorations, making the air glimmer along with the small particles of spirit power. Outside of the panes of those very windows was a world unlike any other. The trees and the grass were all creamy white with a touch of orange and gold hue, as if the bright, morning dawn had just risen from the horizon and gently caressed a world of white snow. Not only that, but there were also countless butterflies of varying colors fluttering inside that beautiful white world, giving it life with their playful flaps that left behind particles of the same color they were. It was truly a place that went above and beyond the title of “The Garden.”

Additionally, from beyond the trees, he could also spot the tops of other buildings styled in Gothic architecture, just like the interior of the hallway he was walking through at the very moment. It was a scene straight out of a fantasy.

“It’s good to know that you enjoy it. I’m sure that Lady Mei would be delighted to hear that.”

“That’s… great and all but, why exactly are you calling me that?”

Ever since the God of Death first found them, he never failed to address him by the strange title of “Young Prince.”

“Oh~! Don’t mind me. I am simply calling you as my whims dictate it. In turn, you can call me by my name. It’s Shigo.”

“…is that so?”

Somehow, Ryosei found it hard to believe but it wasn’t like he had another explanation for it. Putting that aside, he didn’t expect to have such a normal-sounding name. Then again, he didn’t know what counted as a god-like name.

“AH! R-Ryo-chan, come with me! I’ll show you around the—”

“Nope~!”

“No! NOO!! Shigoooo, let me goooo!!”

Shigo took Chouka by the scruff of her neck before she could drag Ryosei away. It seemed like she really didn’t want to see her mother right now. She did break out of her home only to get caught in some trouble so it was natural to expect a worried mother to be livid, especially since this didn’t seem to be the first time this happened. Ryosei could only send his condolences her way while ignoring her wails of protest.

The three eventually arrived in front of a pair of massive double doors painted in ivory and with a purple accent. Seeing this, Chouka immediately stifled and Shigo casually opened the door without a care in the world.

“We’re here~!”

He announced his arrival cheerily into the room. Beyond the doors, Ryosei found a massive greenhouse, a separate building that towered with walls of glass, supported by elaborate metal frames shaped in varying floral styles and a dome roof of glass that allowed the gentle rays of light to reflect from the lush greenery of leaves and flowers. Similar to the scene he saw earlier, there were also a few colored butterflies flapping around the greenhouse.

The three continued on a stone walkway that stretched out to a brick platform that settled in the center of the wonderous garden. There, they found a lone girl sipping tea on one of the sets of outdoor tables and chairs placed on the platform. She had long platinum hair adorned with a black headdress, fair porcelain skin, and turquoise eyes. A pendant of white flowers adorned her neck and she wore a black and white gothic dress. She gave the three a sidelong glance after taking a sip of her tea. Her sharp eyes and expressionless face made her look just like a doll.

“Sit.”

She uttered only one word before taking her eyes off the group and directing them to the snow-white world outside of the confines of the greenhouse. While Ryosei was stunned by her figure, Shigo had long since made himself home while Chouka pulled on his sleeve to catch his attention. Finally noticing her, he lowered his head closer to her and she talked to him in a meek voice.

“…Come with me. Please…”

She asked, pleading with her upturned puppy eyes. It was a stark difference from how she usually handled herself. Often, she was cheery, and prideful, and would even take a condescending attitude depending on the situation. None of her actions actually had any malice in them but that didn’t take away the fact that seeing her confide to him made his mind and heart melt with wholesomeness. So much, in fact, that he didn’t even realize that his body involuntarily followed her and ended up sitting beside her at the same table as the doll-like woman.

“Don’t you think it’s beautiful?”

The woman suddenly asked. Ryosei looked at her and saw that she was still staring outside the glass walls, seemingly directing the question to no one in particular. Looking around, he saw that Shigo was at another table minding his own business sipping a cup of coffee that appeared out of nowhere. Meanwhile, Chouka, the person beside him was as stiff as a stick with her eyes on the ground, her legs glued together, and her hands holding his left hand on her lap, hanging for dear life. She was clearly afraid of what was going to happen to her which only made Ryosei all the more nervous, but now wasn’t the time. It was all too obvious that no one else was planning on answering the woman’s question. Not wanting to be rude and keep her in silence, he gathered the courage to speak his mind.

“Y-Yes… It really is, um, a heavenly sight.”

“Indeed. For that reason, I find it very confusing as to why anyone would want to break out of my sanctuary. Could you enlighten us, Chouka?”

“—!! U-Uhmm!!”

Chouka’s grip tightened like a vice and she even took his entire arm this time instead of being satisfied with only his hand. She tried to come out with some sort of excuse but silenced herself before she could say anything. Hearing her internal struggle, she finally faced them properly and placed her cup of tea down on the table.

“I’m sorry. That was a bit mean of me, but understand that we will have a proper talk about this later. Am I clear, Chouka?”

“…! …!”

She nodded furiously in response, not wanting to catch any more of her mother’s impassive ire. Having that settled, the woman focused her turquoise eyes on Ryosei.

“I see that my daughter has been in your care. You have my gratitude, Konjou Ryosei. I am Mei, Chouka’s daughter, a God of Life, and one of the Di Manes of the previous generation of ambassadors. I am delighted to make your acquaintance.”

**416 – Spirited Wisps**

Konjou Ryosei experienced many events in his life, especially since he was born into a clan of supernatural hunters and hailed among them as a prodigy. Never could he claim that he lived the life of an average person, not with the brutal training and life-and-death struggles that became normal for him in life. Even after the tragic deaths of his parents when he fell from grace and was reduced to nothing but a degenerate otaku, something inside him couldn’t accept that lifestyle as a “normal” one. He could never truly break from his origin; it was just a way of escapism.

It was for that reason that he didn’t even hesitate to jump into the path of that runaway truck to save an innocent child. That being said, he never had any intention of dying at that time. To the masses who lived completely normal lives, getting run over by a body of solid steel weighing thousands of pounds would be the end of them. However, to Ryosei, who fought countless spirits that had abilities beyond the limits of science and the physical world, a heavy mass of steel was the least of his problems.

When he pushed the girl to safety, his leg suddenly gave up on him and rooted him in place. Indeed, he was injured yesterday on that leg after fighting a few demons to save one of his classmates, but it should have healed completely. He couldn’t move out of the way, but he had other ways to safely stop the truck using magic or spirit power, and yet, none of them activated. Unfortunately, without any protection, interference from magic, or spirit power, Ryosei was reduced to nothing more than a normal human being, leading to his unforeseen death.

Normally, his story would have ended in that moment, but his soul miraculously remained in that location, refusing to leave the living world. It was seven years later when someone named Yukou Senkyo was faced with the same situation he did on the very same street. In his attempt to help him, his lingering soul was suddenly sucked into his body, heralding the start of the extension of his bodiless life along with his trials and tribulations that forced him to face something even bigger than anything the Konjou clan had ever dealt with.

At that time, he never would have expected to be in the presence of both a God of Death and a God of Life, a divine pair of polar opposites calmly sipping refreshments in the presence of the other. Contrary to what people may think, the God of Death had a more carefree atmosphere around him while the God of Life had menacing silence radiating from her body. No… that was probably just an inevitability as a mother when she discovered that her child escaped their home yet again only to be faced with the threat of three assassins who were after her life. Well, she didn’t look anything like a mother with how young her figure was but Ryosei kept that thought to himself just in case she took it the wrong way.

“It’s nice to meet you too… Um, Mei-sama, if you prefer being called like that.”

When he sensed that the air around her loosened after Chouka’s obedient response, he took this chance to switch his gears and properly face her.

“Oh, you can call me however you wish. No one here minds. Preferably, I would have liked to meet in better circumstances, but unfortunately, fate wouldn’t have that.”

“I see… Mei-sama, I couldn’t help but notice that you already seem to know about me.”

For the first time after having met her, Mei’s stoic disposition cracked slightly when her neutral lips suddenly curled upward, making a soft smile.

“Yes… Honestly speaking, it’s a bit difficult to forget you after the many times Masao boasted about you back in the day.”

“A-Are you talking about my grandfather?”

Ryosei asked, half with shame and half with concern.

“Correct. We were once fellow ambassadors. He was always an eccentric who either made people laugh or roll their eyes in annoyance with his shenanigans, regardless of who they were or which world they came from. Personally, I enjoyed his presence.”

“Yeah~? Well, I hated him!”

Over from another table, Shigo, a God of Death threw in his rebuttal with a voice rougher than the playful tone he talked to him and Chouka with. His reaction drew a light giggle out of Mei’s mouth.

“Don’t mind him. Those two always butted heads. They claim they’re like oil and water but at the end of the day they respected each other all the same.”

“Mghnn… I have better things to do than listen to this. Mei~, you take care of those kids.”

Shigo stood up from his seat and headed back to the stone walkway they came from. Before he even got far, his figure turned pitch black and disappeared into the darkness.

“Looks like he ran away. He was never the one to handle sensitive topics.”

Not knowing how to react, Ryosei could only stare at the space Shigo disappeared from before shifting his attention back to Mei with a question loaded in his mouth.

“Mei-sama, I was told that my grandfather likely died in the field after being missing for so long… Considering the timeframes, his business had to have been related to his work as a Hero. Do you have any idea where he could have gone? Even if he already did pass away, I just want a chance to talk to him one more time.”

Silence hung in the air for a moment. Mei stared directly into Ryosei’s eyes and he faced her with his strong conviction. It didn’t take long for her to answer his pure spirit. Slowly, she shook her head from side to side with a solemn expression on her face.

“Unfortunately, none of the Di Manes at the time were there to witness what had happened to the other ambassadors. In fact, most of us didn’t even know something wrong was happening until the voice of Hades echoed in our heads. Little did we know that those words were the last breath he drew before dying at the hands of the traitor. ‘You will never take our world,’ he said.”

“Are you talking about… the Sixth Hero?”

The Sixth Hero. Earlier when Freda explained to the few select people present in the Konjou Clan about the past ambassadors, she went over how another god appeared and planted his very own minion among the Heroes of the last generation. By kidnapping one of the true Heroes using a rift, he erased his existence and smoothly replaced him without anyone being the wiser.

“Yes. At the time, me, Shigo, and another Di Manes named Hiroto were all away in our separate missions. Soon after we heard the god of our homeworld speak, the other gods called shortly after to have us back in Zerid. Even though we were all scattered across the world, we were still able to use our powers to keep the evil god from influencing Zerid with their power. None of us knew what became of Masao and the other ambassadors but…”

Mei’s gaze slowly shifted from Ryosei to Chouka. At some point, she lost her tense body and stared at the ground for a completely different reason than earlier. She was crestfallen, but once she realized that the spotlight was upon her, she began explaining as if she was prepared for this.

“I… no, we were there when the tragedy happened…”

She began recalling her perspective of the incident. Aside from Mei and the others, there were two other Di Manes left in the Zerid headquarters of the ambassadors located at the heart of Yuwokrn. Back then, there was no inland sea on the map of Yuworkn. It was once the location of a neutral country called Xevinge, and it happened to be the most powerful sovereign nation in the entire continent. There, Chouka was still a little wisp. Wisps were an extension of a spirit’s body, somewhat similar to what Zeldians would refer to as familiars. They were mechanical beings that would follow any order that the person who summoned them would give, and as the summoner, Mei preferred to have them take the form of butterflies.

However, with Mei’s transcendence from a normal spirited soul to a Di Manes, her wisps also evolved, gaining their very own consciousness. She often cultivated their personalities by giving them something to be interested in the world. In her little wisp form, Chouka took an interest in another Di Manes named Yuuki. She often spent her time with him and watching his adventures, idolizing him. Along with her was another wisp named Masayoshi. He liked following Chouka around and going along with her ideas.

One day, Yuuki noticed that a few days had passed since the last time he saw Hana, the other Di Manes who was supposed to be on stand-by with him in Zerid’s Headquarters. He searched for her with the help of Chouka and Masayoshi, scouring every corner of their base. They came up empty-handed and expanded their search to nearby buildings and establishments. Their efforts continued for a few more days.

Then, on the night of one of their searches when Chouka and Masayoshi gathered in his room to share anything they found, there wasn’t a single sign of Yuuki. Worried, they stuck by each other and searched the headquarters once more. When they arrived near the underground section of the headquarters, Masayoshi noticed Yuuki’s spirit power on a wall abruptly cut off. It was so faint that Chouka failed to sense it. There must have been a passage that opened up a path, but as the wisps that they were, solid objects didn’t hinder them at all so they fazed through the wall and found themselves in a hidden pathway.

The two entered the vents and made their presence scarce, indirectly tracing the faint trail of spirit power that they assumed Yuuki to have left. At the end of the said trail, the two found the Sixth Hero and Yuuki standing in a single room. The Hero had a twisted dagger, his Divine Weapon, in hand and they witnessed as he drove it directly into Yuuki’s heart. But, just before he could fully drive it into his core, Yuuki noticed Chouka and Masayoshi’s arrival.

From that point on, the following events were only the speculation of the other Di Manes after the two explained the story to them. Yuuki broke his own core and spread his spirit power across the room. It wasn’t enough to avoid the inevitable connection that the Hero made with Hades using him as a catalyst, but he successfully passed over fragments of his soul to both Chouka and Masayoshi. No one could imagine what happened after that like how they escaped the room or how the Sixth Hero didn’t notice them, but when they awoke, both Chouka and Masayoshi found themselves with their very own bodies, a stronger sense of personality, and had their own individual existences. From butterfly wisps, they turned into spirits that had a similar look to their mother and the other Di Manes. They became the first existences that Mei referred to as Spirited Wisps.

**417 – Lingering Influence**

“—and that’s how I ended up being me. I used to always have Maccha by my side but he volunteered to become a Divine Weapon. I don’t know where he could be… I wonder if he’s doing well.”

Ryosei couldn’t help but cock his head in confusion when Chouka said that strange nickname reminiscent of tea, but with the context clues he managed to come to the conclusion that she was referring to Masayoshi. When the thought came, he immediately held his breath and kept the question from leaving his mouth, wearing a strained smile all the while before he managed to change the question to something more productive.

“…u-umm, okay, he became a Divine Weapon? What do you mean?”

She stiffened up once more, realizing that she said one word too many after she heard Ryosei’s question. She cast her gaze on Mei, looking for help.

“Divine Weapons aren’t powerful for no reason. Before existences such as Yukou Senkyo and Lightning Leader, Fulgur were born, the closest thing to someone of their power was a Divine Weapon. More often than not, these god-given weapons are made from Iordr Metal, a mineral that can be found in Zerid. Their raw composition is so delicate that it is comparable to glass, but they have the ability to house spirits and spirit power. This, alone, makes them a hidden gem as their strength varies depending on the power of the spirit inside the metal. Following that line of thought, a Divine Weapon requires a spirit to become what they are. When the opportunity to house a Divine Weapon presented itself to us, Masayoshi immediately took it.”

Ryosei pondered in silence for a short while. If that was all it took to become a Divine Weapon, then couldn’t anyone make one? Even if it’s hard to shape raw Iordr Metal, a spirit can enter a raw chunk of it and it would technically become a “Divine Weapon.” He thought of presenting his doubts to Mei, but Chouka was the first to do so.

“Mommy, is it okay to say all of that?”

Clearly, she wasn’t certain about the decision to give this information to him. He didn’t know what parts Mei said were common knowledge but there was surely one or more tidbits that the average person wasn’t privy to, not to mention the fact that she just revealed that her son, quite literally, became a Divine Weapon.

“What are you saying, Chouka? Can’t you recognize the presence of your own brother?”

A moment of silence.

“Eh?”

“Eh?”

Both Ryosei and Chouka’s breaths staggered in unison. Meanwhile, Mei kept a straight face as she pointed at Ryosei’s hip. Specifically, at the blade that was attached to it.

“The spirit who was used to reforge Kuro Yaiba is none other than Masayoshi.”

With that statement, Chouka and Ryosei craned their heads to direct their widened eyes at Kuro Yaiba, or at least, the spirit form of it as its physical body was left with Senkyo and Shiro in the physical world. The one to break the stagnant air was Chouka.

“This is Maccha!? No way! T-Then, why isn’t he showing!? He can hear us right?”

“No. Right now, Masayoshi is in a dormant state. His power is locked away inside the sword. If it wasn’t, then it would run rampant and likely cause an eruption of calamitous energy. The only way for Masayoshi to regain his consciousness safely is to properly activate the sword’s release factor, but you must know that option isn’t something that should be chosen lightly.”

Chouka took a short pause, holding her breath upon hearing this, allowing Ryosei to cut in.

“What’s calamitous energy? What does having Masayoshi as my Divine Weapon mean for me?”

Expecting the questions, Mei answered quickly.

“I believe that someone other than me is a better target for those questions. For now, I want our talk to focus on a quick overview of the current situation. Ryosei-san, do you have any idea who Enny is?”

“Enny? I recall Chouka talking about how she manages the Spirit Realm and has the ability to send anyone to any place in the three worlds but nothing more than that.”

“That will suffice. You see, the reason Enny has these abilities is that she is a Divine Beast created by the God of the Spirit Realm, Hades. The Entity is what others call her, and she has complete control over the Spirit Realm. She is the only reason why this world hasn’t been taken over by the Invading God after having taken Hades’ life. Other titles that preceded her greatness are ‘The Watcher’ and ‘Living Relater.’ This is because she has complete knowledge of anything and everything that occurs in the Spirit Realm, no matter how desolate the place is, she has eyes and ears to it. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration if someone said that she is basically the Spirit Realm Incarnate. I’m sure she’ll enjoy boasting about herself to you later, so be prepared.”

“Wait, what—”

Ryosei couldn’t help but feel like she said something incredibly ominous just now, but Mei didn’t have any plans to stop and continued.

“More importantly, she was the one who informed us about Chouka’s whereabouts and the fact that she made contact with you. But, what truly concerns me is the fact that she said that she made contact with the Control Leader of END.”

With that final claim, all of the desire for Ryosei to pursue the previous subject all but disappeared and his eyes sharpened. He knew that this topic was something that needed his undivided attention.

“After the Entity sent you both away, the Control Leader showed herself to the Entity. I wasn’t informed of the details of their conversation, but in short, she challenged the Entity to a struggle for power.”

Ryosei kept his silence, awaiting Mei’s elaboration.

“Yukou Senkyo. The person holding that name is the centerpiece of what is happening around us. His fate might be sealed by the prophecy, but the way in which he reaches that point in time is a very important detail that we must observe. Just earlier, Freda, the Lost Maiden, revealed to you the core of the incident that happened 17 years ago.”

She was referring to how the Sixth Hero, under the Invading God’s orders, killed Hades, the God of the Spirit Realm, which resulted in having the memory and history of the Earth and the Spirit Realm disappear from existence, creating a new history where no one ever made contact with other worlds. Freda explained how the Spirit Realm recovered quickly because of how part of that world is always connected to the two other worlds. Now that he knew about the Divine Beast’s presence, she was probably more than just a boon in the efforts to rebuild the world’s previously lost knowledge.

“Even in that event, although he wasn’t the centerpiece, Yukou Senkyo was an important factor, or at least, that is what the Entity claims. I do not know much about him apart from him being associated with the Hero Yukou Yuuto, but the Entity believes that the side that secures his power, whether it will be END or any other opposing faction, will have the key to whatever future they desire. Right now, END has something that guarantees that they will seize his power once Yukou Senkyo manifests it. What the Entity wants from us is to cut off whatever ties they have behind the scenes before they decide to use the said power. And, Ryosei-san, the Entity has chosen you to become one of the people to resolve this problem. Would you be willing to accept her offer?”

The room stilled in silence. Ryosei kept to himself and gathered his thoughts about the new information that became apparent to him. Mei stayed silent, waiting for him to give a reaction to her words. And to the side, Chouka could sense the tense atmosphere that she dared not break.

How many minutes had passed? One? Two? Or maybe none at all? Perhaps only mere seconds which felt longer than they should, passed before Ryosei finally found the response that felt right for him.

“Mei-sama. Please answer this one question: is the Entity an ally?”

“Undoubtedly. No one other than she holds a greater grudge against the Invading God that led to the death of her parent. Her ways might seem absurd to us, but bear with me when I say that she wants nothing more than peace to be returned to the three worlds, and for the god that dared trample our lands to be eradicated from existence.”

He gave an understanding nod before heaving an exasperated breath that carried his response.

“Very well. For the sake of Senkyo, and all of those important to me, I will make the most out of my relationship with the Entity. And for someone who was told about what had happened to us, Mei-sama, am I correct to assume that you are aware of the contents of my spirit bond with Chouka?”

Back when they were sent to Black Rose, Chouka needed to solidify his partnership with Ryosei. To that end, she used the power of her mother, a God of Life, as a bargaining chip to elicit his services and secured it through a ritual similar to that of a familiar pact. His mission was to escort her safely to The Garden, in which they were already inside now. This meant that what was left was for him to state his desires.

“Yes, I am fully aware of the pact she made with you. I have all intention of seeing to it that whatever request you have is fulfilled so long as it is within the realm of my capabilities.”

Ryosei already decided on what he wanted the moment he learned about Chouka’s relationship with the God of Life.

“I want you to save someone’s life.”

**418 – A Step Into The Entity’s Ambition**

After explaining to Mei the details of his request, she directed him to a certain part of The Garden. He recalled Chouka’s pale expression when she realized that Mei was telling Ryosei to leave the two alone. Her complexion recovered when they began talking about Masayoshi and other serious topics, but once those came to pass, everything she recovered took a nosedive and left her with one thing: terror. At the end of the day, Ryosei knew that Mei was just doing what she thought she had to do as a mother, but he knew better than to curry the wrath of a god.

“…The wrath of a god, huh? Is there a difference between Mei-sama and gods like Hades?”

Now that he thought about it, he’d end up angering a god either way since he was against the actions of this “invading god.” The idea segued to him wondering about the difference between someone who became a god, like Mei and Shigo, and someone who was already a god, like the three rulers Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, if there were any.

As if on cue, a strange haughty laugh reminiscent of a crow came from above him.

“Kakaka! Don’t you think that question is a little late, Newborn?”

Angling his head to the voice, he found a spread of black wings behind a humanoid figure donning traditional Japanese clothing, a katana by its hips, and the head of a crow instead of a human.

“You… you’re… Shin, right?”

It felt like a distant memory, but he still remembered getting attacked by him when he first entered the Earth-Spirit World around a month ago. His excuse for doing so was suspect at best, saying that he wanted to “subdue” him because he exited the dome of light. The said structure was a protective barrier his mother created for the Konjou Clan to keep all hostiles away, both from the physical and spiritual world. Of course, none of the local spirits knew this and just like Shin, treated it like a forbidden ground before he found Ryosei leisurely walking out of it. Its boundaries were undiscernible on Earth through the naked eye but it stuck out like a sore thumb in the Spirit Realm. It was basically a giant attraction, so Shin’s reasoning wasn’t unfounded but it also couldn’t be said it was sound. Their last meeting ended with Ryosei parting with his bisected body, a result of their fight, and headed off to kill a spirit to ally with him since he had no connections with anyone from the Spirit Realm at the time.

“Kakaka! I didn’t think you would remember my name! Well done!”

“I didn’t think so either. Anyway, why are you here?”

Ryosei looked around to confirm that he was still in the Garden. It was apparently a sacred domain that could only be entered and exited using special means. Ryosei and Chouka got there by following dark portals that Shigo created. He assumed Mei could do the same, but how did Shin, a normal spirit, get inside what was quite literally a garden of a god.

“That’d be my handiwork, Ryosei.”

A third voice vibrated the air. Turning to the source, he found that a familiar and no-less-creepy mouth had appeared on one of the nearby trees.

“You’re… The Entity!”

“Yes, yes, that would be me. Oh~, but you can call me by my nickname just like Chouka does.”

The current most powerful being suddenly appeared out of nowhere. A flood of questions flowed through his mind. There were many he wanted answered along with the doubts that accompanied those questions. He wasn’t even sure if his knowledge of the past was truth or misinformation, not after discovering the divine intervention of the Invading God and the talk he just had with Mei. But, before he could get any questions out of his mouth, Enny continued without reserve.

“I thought that Shin would be the perfect partner for you to have since you two are already acquainted with each other.”

“A partner? For what?”

“My, what else? To experience the Spirit Realm for what it is, of course!”

A pool of pitch-black darkness with ripples of purple began to expand from beneath Ryosei’s feet. Then, countless arms of similar structures formed around to seize him, pulling him down into the mire of murky shades.

“This again!? I knew it! You were the one who first pulled Senkyo and the others into the Spirit Realm!”

A memory resurfaced in Ryosei’s mind. It happened only a few days after his soul was taken into Senkyo’s body and fully regained his consciousness. When an incident happened in Senkyo’s school that led to a mass of missing students, just when they were about to leave the gates, a scene identical to the one he was experiencing at the very moment happened to Itsuki, one of Senkyo’s classmates, and ended up swallowing Itsuki along with Senkyo and Yuu.

At first, Ryosei thought that it was the work of their enemy at the time: Fulgur, the Lightning Leader of END. If he was capable of such feats, then it wouldn’t be strange for unsuspecting victims in their homes would be spirited away. But what confused him at the time was that there was barely anyone waiting for their arrival in the Spirit Realm. Sure, there were enemies, but nothing their group couldn’t handle. One would assume that if they had the power to kidnap someone they would bring them to a place that was convenient for them. But when it happened to them, they only ended up in front of the school gates, not in the place that Fulgur was at.

It was a small, minor detail, but now it was clear to him. The person who transported the trio into the Spirit Realm wasn’t Fulgur, it was the Entity. But… for what reason?

*“\*Mei-sama. Please answer this one question: is the Entity an ally?\*”*

*“\*Undoubtedly. No one other than she holds a greater grudge against the Invading God that led to the death of her parent. Her ways might seem absurd to us, but bear with me when I say that she wants nothing more than peace to be returned to the three worlds, and for the god that dared trample our lands to be eradicated from existence.\*”*

A recent memory flashed through his mind. It was likely his subconscious telling himself to calm down before jumping to any conclusions. Still, the wide, eerie smile akin to a taunting sneer from the eldritch mouth made it hard to believe those words. True to her warning, Enny’s method of forcing others to her whims was nothing but absurd. As much as he wanted to disregard them as nonsense, the fact that they came from Mei, a Di Manes of the previous generation, gave them weight, one that allowed him to grit his teeth and wait to see where these events would take him.

**419 – Enny and Shin’s Welcome**

An endless void that showed nothing but darkness. No one could tell if there was anything hidden in the shadows. There could be someone watching them, maybe even planning on ending their lives, but the measure of darkness went beyond sealing away the reach of light. Ryosei had the ability to perceive the environment around him through his senses unique even to spirits, not relying on sight, outlining the world as if straight out of a comic. That being said, a profound emptiness flashed through his mind. He didn’t know if this meant that there truly was nothing around him or that the Entity’s influence completely silenced his own powers.

Thinking about it, when he first met the Entity with Chouka by his side, the divine beast said something about not being confident about their ability to bring them to the right destination. But, compared to that, she showed unwavering confidence this time around when she bound his legs with her shadowy hands. He thought, “Was it really a coincidence that they were brought to that specific location?”

His first experience being transported across the Spirit Realm by Enny ended with them being left to fend themselves inside the confines of an organization called “Black Rose,” founded by one of the previous generation’s Di Manes named Hiroto. At the time, the thought of revealing their identities and leaving peacefully crossed his mind, but he entertained the idea for only a second. The structure of the room they were sent to had a clear you-are-not-welcome atmosphere combined with the massive mechanism at the center that screamed “This is a secret!,” and Chouka’s anxious reaction all but told him that resolving their situation through peaceful means was impossible.

Assuming that Enny’s words were true that she had unstable control of where they would end up, out of the entirety of the Spirit Realm which spanned over three different worlds, the Earth-Spirit World, Zerid-Spirit World, and the Spirit World proper, what were the chances that they would end up in that single, most dangerous place possible? Ryosei had a hard time convincing himself of the Entity’s innocence. However, the very thought of that baffled him as well.

Why? Because someone had successfully lied to him.

Ryosei, even after death, had the ability to differentiate truths from falsehoods. For the longest time, he didn’t know how or why he had such a strange ability. In his time alive, people around him summed it up to Ryosei being extraordinarily perceptive. But, after hearing from Mei that Kuro Yaiba, the sword he wielded, had the spirit of her child housing it cleared the fog of speculation. Masayoshi, the supposed spirit that was used to reforge the broken Divine Weapon, Kuro Yaiba, was a spirited wisp that gained the majority of Yuuki’s power.

Before leaving the mother and daughter by themselves, Ryosei asked more about the spirit inside his blade. Between Chouka and Masayoshi, the latter consumed more of the previous Di Manes’ power when he shielded Chouka from what, at the time, seemed like an explosive blast of destructive energy. In other words, Masayoshi inherited most of Yuuki’s power, which excelled the most in Mental Arts, the same field of power that Chouka demonstrated when they escaped Black Rose. By having such a spirit embody his weapon, the conclusion he arrived at was that it influenced his body enough to allow him the ability to recognize lies, the same power Chouka used on him when they initially met.

Despite this, for the first time, a lie breached this formally unbreakable defense. Before, he misunderstood the answers that Yuu gave him. That oversight allowed her to get close to Senkyo, ensnared his heart, and brought them to this particular situation. But, the Entity’s blatant lie was a different story. There was no misunderstanding, miscommunication, or anything of the sort. This showed him proof of just what he was dealing with. No lies could get past him. Nothing, so long as they didn’t belong to The Entity.

Just then, a streak of purple horizontal light pierced through the darkness and bounced off his squinting eyes as they tried to adjust to the sudden brightness. The light became larger and larger until it outlined the shape of teeth and opened wide to reveal the scene on the other side of the darkness.

“KAA!! Look alive, Newborn! There’s no time to sleep! Of course, if you want to die, I don’t care!”

When his eyes finally adapted and his vision cleared, he found himself soaring through the sky as Shin carried him by the wrist. His wings kept the both of them from plummeting into the spread of amaranthine land.

“What… is this?”

A tone of astonishment flowed with his question.

“Ka! We are currently in Warped Territories. Corrupted lands that are infested with anomalies called Predators!”

Below them, the moonlit beauty of the usual Spirit Realm that he knew of was gone. It was also different from the ephemeral shapes and colors that the Spirit World looked like when they first entered a settlement in an attempt to escape Black Rose. What laid before his eyes were fissured lands, withered nature, a dark reddish purple miasma spread as far as the eye can see, and the many squirming and screeching monsters that populated the land.

“…Did you just say ‘anomalies?’”

But, even after being faced with such a sight, Ryosei’s senses hooked onto something else. The mention of a strange description that a certain lightning-wielding spirit of END once gave Senkyo.

“Ka! Indeed! They are the term that we use for beings that do not belong in any of the three worlds, or at least, should not have existed under normal circumstances! After Lord Hades, the god of the spirit realm, died, the authority fell upon the Entity, the next most powerful being in existence and a loyal servant of our fallen god. The Divine Beast is often referred to as the Spirit Realm Incarnate, like the personification of this very realm. She has the ability to see and witness everything that happens in the Spirit Realm regardless of location. That means that there should be nothing about the Spirit Realm that she doesn’t know. Yet, for some reason, these Predators are the only things that she admits that she has no knowledge about. It could be a lie for all we know, but with the amount of caution she gives everyone about them, I highly doubt it. This is only secondhand knowledge I got from the Entity, so you know who to bother if you have anything to ask. But, for now…”

Shin threw the blade by his hip with his open hand.

“Enjoy this warm welcome we prepared! Kakakaka!”

“W-What—HEY! SHIN!? SHIIIIIIINN!!!”

The pressure binding his wrist suddenly disappeared and so did the calm leisurely air he traveled through until now. The wind pressure was suddenly against him as his body succumbed to gravity and dove into a particularly large clump of purple beings. Looking up, he saw the sneer Shin directed at him before speeding into a different clump of Predators not far from where he was landing.

“Damn it!”

Realizing the futility of complaints, he focused on clearing the enemies below him. Allowing himself to land in a clump of unknown enemies was pure suicide, so he slowly broke his fall by using wind magic, and spirit power to harden the air and create footholds to travel on.

“I’m going to remember this!!”

He cursed him before drawing Kuro Yaiba and entering the fray.

**420 – The Spirit Realm’s Anomaly**

*\*Shiiing!\**

There was a heavy silence in the air as Ryosei bisected four purple figures with his single, crescent slash.

“Amazing! You’re already getting the hang of it! But you can do better, can’t you? You could have killed them from a distance! There was no need to get close! You aren’t just a sword freak anymore; you’re a spirit now!”

Unfortunately, the focus he had was short-lived as a voice kept narrating and judging his moves. For a while, it was like an annoying echo that criticized every little detail like a pompous connoisseur.

“Shut up!”

The irritation was clear in his twisted expression. The source of his misery was the most powerful being in the Spirit Realm, the Entity. Every now and again, its eldritch mouth would form on a random surface near him and give incessant admonishment, so often that his ears were more than ready to purposefully turn deaf from the valid criticism behind each word. He would have passed off every word Enny spoke if it weren’t for his rational side holding his sanity by a tether.

The half-hour that Ryosei spent fighting the Predators felt like they dragged on with Enny’s presence. Though it irked him to no end, he could not deny that she gave him legitimate advice. She even finally began answering some of his questions while he was fighting.

Predators came in all shapes and sizes but the majority of them could be classified under a few names. They are commonly characterized by their combination of black and amaranthine color. They have the ability to control the world around them just like spirits can and the key to defeating them is the same as spirits: find and break their cores.

Most enemies that Ryosei was faced with were a category of Predators called Devil Parasites. They were small, nimble creatures that moved at high speeds through land and air. Their bodies were like small blobs with countless tendrils wriggling chaotically with two small horns on their heads. Enny explained that they would use their tendrils to latch onto a spirit and suck every single drop of spirit power they had. They were small but no less deadly than other Predators. Getting swarmed by them would mean the end to any spirit, which is why it was important to keep them at bay.

Ryosei did so by using the protective sheet of spirit power incorporated in flash strike. The barrier that was once used to protect the user from the wind pressure was now used to keep him safe from the parasites. Though, being the spirit-suckers that they were, it didn’t do much but act like a meat shield. But, so long as Ryosei cut them down the moment they made contact, it was barely excusable. This was also one of the angles that Enny admonished him for, saying that he was basically feeding them with that tactic.

“Devil Beasts, Ryosei! Get them like how I taught you!”

The new group that came barreling down at him was the Devil Beasts. A faceless Predator with arms so long and claws so deadly that they stretched past their feetless legs. They had no heads but their large torso that resembled one basically functioned the same way since it contained their cores. Piercing it at the right location would guarantee victory. The problem was getting something to pierce deep enough before they moved away.

Predators—no, spirits in general felt no pain. Unlike the inhabitants of Zerid and Earth, they had no need for pain receptors which made them hard to deal with, and the Devil Beasts even harder. Despite their lack of feet, they ran on all fours like hounds and moved even faster than the small, nimble Devil Parasites. With their hit-and-run tactics, getting his blade to pierce their skin was no problem, but piercing deep enough to hit the core was a crucial part that escaped him. Ryosei’s first encounter with them ended with him hacking and slashing nothing but empty air.

“Not this time.”

With renewed focus, he waited for the beasts to get closer. When they did, he deftly evaded their deadly strikes with no wasted energy. Then, when he found himself at the center of the horde of Devil Beasts, he drew the energy inside him and created a sphere of spirit power, blocking out the Devil Parasites beyond it and locking in the Devil Beasts in the confined space. Now that he had them trapped, he had no trouble letting loose and taking out two or more Devil Beasts with each slash.

The Devil Parasites swarmed the barrier of spirit power, coating it with their bodies of ominous purple, red, and black. But, before they could breach it, Ryosei’s job was all but done. Well, half done, seeing that he still had a swarm of Devil Parasites to deal with. Now that they were in a clump, killing them was easy, but that wasn’t what he was after.

“That’s free money right there, Ryosei! Take them while you can!”

Following Enny’s words, he tapped into his spirit power once more. He poured more energy into the barrier all at once in a matter of milliseconds before the Devil Parasites could absorb them. Once he gathered enough, he ignited the spirit power using the same concept as the Konjou Clan’s Brute class skill: “Burst.” Igniting his own clump of concentrated spirit power resulted in a massive explosion around him, wrapping his surroundings with black smoke. Immediately after, he erected a new spirit barrier that expanded from his body and into the cloud of smoke. Soon enough, he heard a sound reminiscent of coins dropping on the ground. The source of these sounds rolled up to his feet.

“So these are Dark Cores…”

Ryosei picked up the spherical item below him. He eyed it as the amaranthine core fluctuated its ephemeral glow from black, red, and purple. He remembered the time when he questioned the boy with orange hair and blue eyes from the Earth-Spirit World establishment called Savor Soul. He told him how they used these very cores as currency in the Spirit Realm. Ryosei collected them by expanding a barrier of spirit power and coating all of the cores it made contact with.

Dark cores were either gathered from fully rampaging spirits or these Predators. Usually, Devil Parasites would just suck up any type of spirit barrier that would come its way. However, this only applied when its tendrils could make contact. Right now, the Devil Parasite’s entire body was gone except for its core. The core itself was only an object of concentrated spirit power. It didn’t have the power to suck up other spirit power without the Devil Parasite’s body. So, just like the orange-haired boy said back when he first discovered Savor Soul, since Predators acted completely by instinct, the moment they realized they had no chance of escape, the struggling core quieted down and remained bound in Ryosei’s sheet spirit power. Curiously enough, when Enny explained this to him, she revealed how she was the one who came up with the idea of making a currency out of the Predators and spread it across the entire Spirit Realm. When he went to ask why, the eldritch mouth that was talking disappeared and avoided the question.

**421 – Refining Accumulated Experience**

“A shower in fortune is great and all, but you’re not done yet, Ryosei! Don’t make the same mistake as last time!”

Enny said as a figure in the distance appeared. Its body floated above the ground with purple energy that resembled electricity. It had a coal-black upper body with cracks of purple and red. Its head had only a wide mouth, otherwise faceless. It had two arms. One of them was coal-black like the body but it was severed, leaving only a stump, while the other one was a larger arm built with a muscly texture of purple and red. This was a ranged Predator called a Devil Shaman.

“Don’t use magic; I know!”

There was one very important concept that Ryosei was not informed of before now: the existence of calamitous energy. When faced with this ranged monolith of an enemy, the Devil Shaman used the environment to entrap Ryosei and hit him with its devastating attacks. This caused him to use no small amount of magic. The look on his dumbfounded face was so priceless that Enny couldn’t help but let out a hearty laugh when the chuck of ground that Ryosei tried to break through with magic suddenly burst into ebony flames. Luckily for him, it was a stationary wall erected by the Devil Shaman and wasn’t something that was hurling at him at high speeds. Otherwise, he would have likely been consumed in those very flames of absolute destruction.

After having her fun and calming down a bit, Enny told him all about calamitous energy as he fought the first Devil Shaman he encountered. A wrong mix of magic and spirit power will give birth to a calamity. One that could not be put out except by the sands of time. Though, generally, a spirit consumed in these flames was probably already doomed. When he heard of this, he promptly gave numerous examples of magic being used in the spirit realm and with this phenomenon not occurring.

Enny countered all of them with her confident words. The biggest discrepancy was their fight against the Lightning Leader of END, Fulgur. In the Spirit Realm, the childlike leader created an entirely new world made of magic. They also fought each other with grand spells that should have elicited this phenomenon of calamitous energy. But then, Enny reminded him of a word that the Lightning Leader referred to both himself and Senkyo.

An anomaly.

As Shin said earlier, they were either beings that did not belong in any of the three worlds, or alternatively, should not have existed under normal circumstances. Ryosei didn’t know what Senkyo was, but Fulgur clearly called himself as “an evil spirit with a mana source.” Just like Senkyo, he suggested that both mana and spirit power existed inside his body. At this point, Enny went on about how the two were, in fact, anomalies that could cohabitate mana and spirit power inside their vessels and apply them to the outer world, but they were not the same. Specifically, she said that Fulgur was an inferior version of Senkyo. She apparently observed Fulgur when he first arrived in the Spirit Realm and let him roam free. There, she discovered that he did not have the same potential as Senkyo had: the ability to create a refined version of calamitous energy, otherwise known as the creation element, the hidden 12th element of magic.

Getting off that tangent, Enny went to compare the Divine Weapons with the two anomalies, Senkyo and Fulgur. As Mei suggested earlier in their talk, Divine Weapons function in the same field as Senkyo and Fulgur, and are second only to them… or perhaps third if Senkyo was truly more powerful than Fulgur. In any case, They function in the field of harmonizing mana and spirit power. Senkyo could do it perfectly, Fulgur could do it to the point where he could avoid creating calamitous energy, whereas Divine Weapons could only reduce the chances of triggering this phenomenon.

Using the other examples Ryosei cited, in their battle against hollowed knights when they tried to kidnap Kaede, Ryosei’s cousin, and the current Konjou Clan Chief’s sister, Senkyo and Ryosei used many destructive spells to defeat their enemies. Yuu was also there using magic against them, but not once did the phenomenon of calamitous energy present itself. But, Enny begged to differ.

She was there to witness the entire scene since it happened in the Spirit Realm. There were, in fact, many instances where calamitous energy was produced. Not by Senkyo and Ryosei, but by Yuu. Her magic attacks sparked the ebony flames of calamity, but they only appeared out of sight because of her precise strikes at the cores of their revenant enemies. This was actually the most optimal way to fight off spirits since it was potent, and almost every spirit that knew it feared magic like the plague. If they were hit by magic and it produced black flames, it was their first instinct to sever that body part before it spread to the rest of their body and reached their core. But, if the flames sparked directly at their core, then their fate was already sealed. With years of experience running away from END under her belt, Yuu knew of this and utilized this knowledge to make quick work of her enemies.

On the other hand, Senkyo and Ryosei were using magic left and right with no sight of dark flames ever appearing. This was because Ryosei was using Senkyo’s body as a medium to cast magic, the current most powerful being in the field of harmonizing mana and spirit power. There was no chance for them to ignite the phenomenon to begin with. Unbeknownst to them, this highly contributed to Yuu being convinced that Senkyo was the person she was looking for, seeing as no hint of calamitous energy ignited in the entire fierce fight. Now that Ryosei realized this, Yuu’s betrayal was probably only a matter of time. Armed with knowledge that neither he nor Senkyo had, there was probably little to no chance of this issue with Yuu resolving peacefully.

As for the many times Ryosei used magic on his own, Enny only congratulated him on being so lucky that he didn’t cause any devastating damage, eliciting Ryosei’s wry smile. The silver lining to this was that he discovered what and where to use magic on, that being the cores of his enemies and avoiding the environment for everyone’s safety.

Back to the task at hand, the new Devil Shaman that appeared used the environment against Ryosei. This being one of the top items of the “Don’t Use Magic On This in the Spirit Realm” list, he had to hold back his use of magic and rely solely on his spirit power, unless he was absolutely certain that his magic attack would land solely on his enemies. Thankfully, Enny presented a fine alternative for him.

After evading every wall, chunks of earth that were thrown at him, claws that sprouted from the ground and threatened to seize him, and the deadly blasts of spirit power that came from the Devil Shaman’s empowered arm, he finally got it inside his strike range. He used flash strike to confuse his enemy and every now and again made clones of dark magic to confuse it. Since he wasn’t using it offensively, there wasn’t a problem with that, except if his clone was hit by a chunk of rock and turned it into a ball of flaming destruction. Enny normally wouldn’t allow such a thing, but since they were inside Warped Territories, she turned a blind eye to it. This basically translated to, “Since they’re my enemies, it’s not my problem.” Ryosei got a glimpse of Enny’s cruelty through this implication, but he had the same mindset, thinking “If her cruelty isn’t directed at me, it’s not my problem.”

Ryosei had better things to do and that was to successfully execute his attack. He recalled the time when he and Chouka were running from Black Rose. There was a time when a fox spirit trapped them in an alleyway with five layers of reinforced spirit barriers. At that moment, his mind forged a new technique that he didn’t even know was possible. This was his attempt to reenact that feat.

Noticing the alarming distance between the Devil Shaman and Ryosei, the Predator threw in a flurry of obstacles for Ryosei to deal with while it retreated. Unfortunately for it, the very skill that Ryosei was trying to use was one that connected thoughts, a technique that became stronger with connected targets. Having obstacles dot its trail proved counter-productive as Ryosei’s mind strengthened at the line of hardships.

*“\*Spirit Style, Flowing Thoughts.\*”*

His eyes mapped out every milestone, avoiding every goal that served as a red herring to hinder his achievement. The dots appeared, the lines connected, and his slash struck true as it cut the Devil Shaman’s body to pieces, leaving only its core which he trapped in his own spirit power and turned it into a dark core. His execution spanned over half a second. Behind him was the path he took, each obstacle that led him to the Devil Shaman was cut in two.

“…Using mental resources to defeat enemies, huh? Not bad.”

He said to himself before turning to his next enemy.

**422 – The Divine Beast’s Task**

“Ka! That was a good show, Newborn! But it looks like you had to learn the hard way, ka!”

In came Shin who dealt with his own share of Predators. At first, Ryosei was only trying to clear enough to get a proper conversation with the tengu, but at some point realized that he had more to gain by fighting the unknown creatures. If he were to be honest, Enny was a great help… but he wouldn’t be caught dead voicing that opinion.

“It would’ve been better if the both of you just taught me like normal people!”

“Kaka! Says the one who almost killed me with magic! Take it as payback; we are spirits, and spirits aren’t normal!”

Shin slashed his sword at an incoming Devil Parasite. The attack released two thin but deadly waves of spirit power that each made a beeline for the two nearest Devil Parasites. The waves split into two for every Devil Parasite it killed, stopping only when either it hit a non-Devil Parasite or sensed no enemies nearby. It was clearly a technique designed specifically to kill the small spirit-eating creatures.

“Don’t you want their dark cores?”

Asked Ryosei while he continued dealing with his own foes.

“Ka! They are irrelevant! Anyone can get dark cores from Devil Parasites. I’m here at the request of the Divine Beast. If you want to gather dark cores, I suggest you hunt for a bigger quarry or at least a thicker wave of Devil Parasites unless you want to waste your time and energy.”

“That so!?”

Ryosei replied with a grunt as he cleaved the bodies of four Devil Beasts, gathering their cores.

“Ka! Not bad, for a newborn that is!”

In the midst of battle, the two noticed that a change happened to the Devil Parasites attacking them. Their behavior changed from being relentless to one of caution, spiraling around them instead of immediately approaching.

“Ka! Here comes a big one!”

From the horizon, Ryosei spotted a gathering of Devil Parasites stacking on each other until they created a humongous form that towered over everything else in the vicinity. Its form was akin to a black, purple, and red blob, but slowly, it solidified into making a rock-like creature with legs that resembled a crab’s, one gigantic right arm, and flailing rock tendrils in place of its left arm. Its spherical body expanded as its gaping mouth screeched, revealing an abyss of black, red, and purple.

“That’s what we call a Devil Giant.”

Said Enny, who took a short pause for dramatic effect before continuing.

“Unlike the others, this isn’t much of a new creature as it is an amalgamation of existing creatures. This is the result of a Devil Shaman using its life as a core to expand its capabilities. Before, their control was limited to the environment. But now, they can control nearby Devil Parasites and make gigantic creations such as these. A Devil Giant has no definite form as they take a different one depending on the situation and what the Devil Shaman desires. And, the most infuriating part about them is that they don’t die unless you kill them all at once. This is a being that gathered the lives of others. Kill one, others replace. Kill the core, and a new one takes over. When faced with this creature your options are to kill them all at once, retreat, or die. Fun, isn’t it?”

“Fun? What part!?”

The way Ryosei saw this, he had no other option than to use magic. His sword techniques were swift, precise, and effective, but none of them were designed to deal with a giant monster that needed to be slayed in a single strike. If there was, it needed magic, a resource that he now realized needed to be used with caution. He had no doubt in his mind that casting a magic spell that would kill the Devil Giant in a single strike would bathe the land in ebony flames. Since they were in what Enny and Shin called Warped Territories, then that option might be excusable. The problem now was how to go about it.

While he ruminated on his options, Shin took a step forward.

“Newborn, when we met in the mountains around a month ago, I was nothing but a curious child who acted on impulse. That, I admit.”

The katana he held began to glow with blue light.

“Which is why I couldn’t believe my eyes when the Divine Beast approached me soon after and bestowed upon me a heartless goal.”

It began to lose shape, only to take the form of a hand fan. The Devil Giant began to rush at them.

“‘Become a visitant,’ she said. ”

The towering colossus lifted off the ground and took flight, speeding faster than it was on the ground. Shin’s wings spread wide at the same time he extended his fan outward. With a single, powerful stroke, he swung it across his chest in tandem with the flap of both of his wings. It released a powerful gale that spread black feathers in the air. The feathers quickly morphed into crows that left more black feathers in their trail with every flap. Then, every black feather that adorned the sky turned into more crows. The process repeated until a wall of black crows consumed the barrier of Devil Parasites that tried to lock them in a single place and overshadowed the incoming colossus. The murder of crows collided with the Devil Giant.

Before Ryosei even realized it, the large gigantic figure disappeared as if it never existed. The murder of crows didn’t even falter as they clashed. No, it wasn’t much of a clash than it was a powerful current washing away a grain of sand. The final moment Ryosei caught the giant’s figure was when the crows overshadowed it. By then, its fate was already sealed. Not a single trace of battle was left as the crows spread out and disappeared into thin air.

“What… just…”

Ryosei was at a loss for words, and all he could do to try and recover was chew at the last few words that left Shin’s mouth.

*“\*‘Become a visitant,’ she said. \*”*

From his memory, he recalled his previous encounter with Shin. Compared to the last time he saw him, his power was on a completely different level. Ryosei wiped the floor with him last time to the point where he even bisected Shin’s body and interrogated him for information. But, if he faced him in a serious battle now, he wasn’t sure if he could even make it out of the battle alive. He noticed nothing different when he encountered him earlier, but perhaps that was a sign that he was powerful enough to mask his true strength.

All of that aside, what truly had him wracking his brain was when he recalled the spirit statuses that Shin explained to him in his interrogation. A Spirit Status. A sign of a spirit’s strength and the amount of power that they possess.

They begin on the status of Ghost for spirited souls, the souls of living beings who died on Earth or Zerid and, although they lose their memories, become spirits due to their lingering attachments. From there, they increase to Eidolon, then Revenant, Ryosei’s current spirit status, and then they arrive at Spirit. Spirit is a major milestone for spirited souls but to true spirits, those who are born naturally in the Spirit Realm, it is their starting point. The statuses continue to Seer, Visitant, Guardian, Sentinel, Demigod, and finally, God. If what Shin was saying was true, then that could only mean that he climbed up to the 5th highest spirit status in existence.

“A visitant… how?”

He couldn’t help but ask the question, failing to hide his perplexity. Ryosei knew exactly how difficult it was to raise his spirit status, not to mention the fact that most fights he encountered only lowered his status because the amount of spirit power he needed to use exceeded the amount he gained from his enemies. He realized this only when he tried to reach the visitant status to get Senkyo back to Earth. That plan quickly fell apart when he couldn’t even manage to reach the Spirit status.

“Ka! That just goes to show how much value the Divine Beast sees in you, Newborn. I struggled to get to this status through my own efforts, but not without the help of the Divine Beast who pointed me to the most efficient path to reach this point. I was a mere Spirit when we met; look at me now, a Visitant that can take down a Devil Giant with a single stroke! You cannot find a more reliable partner in the entire Sprit Realm!”

Shin declared proudly with his chest out and his arms akimbo.

*\*Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!\**

All of a sudden, before the two could finish their conversation, a violent rumbling shook the land. The nearby cracks and fissures expanded.

“Uh, oh! Alright, enough drama! We’re getting out of here!”

Enny said with an unusual hint of panic in her voice. The usual pit of murky black shadows with its countless hands appeared below Shin and Ryosei. This time, Ryosei was slowly getting used to this sensation but that didn’t take away the fact that this clearly wasn’t a normal situation.

“What do you mean? What’s happening?”

“Ka! This rumbling is a sign, Newborn. A sign to turn tail and run. Remember it well. Even I, with my newfound powers, am nothing against the threat that looms beyond this rumbling. The threat that we call Chaos, along with their snake-like familiars that we call Devils. The overlord of the Warped Territories and its loyal guard dogs. Do not cross them. This is my warning to you.”

Shin explained slowly, placing every bit of fear and terror that he felt in every word. Ryosei turned his head upward. The light was slowly disappearing as the pool of murky shadows began to shrink and disappear. Beyond it, just before the shadows closed, a pillar of morbid purple blotted the sky. That was the last thing he saw before the darkness consumed them.

**423 – Delinquent’s Pride**

“That was a productive day, don’t you think?”

Enny’s voice greeted them as the light returned to their eyes. The natural snow-like particles of the Spirit Realm returned with the turquoise environment that reflected brightly like moonlight. A quick scan let Ryosei know that he was back where the God of Death, Shigo, picked up both him and Chouka. Over the tall forest trees, he could spot a massive sphere of white, the protective barrier of the Konjou Clan. The heavy, constricting presence of the Predators and the Warped Territories was all but gone, allowing him to take a deep breath of fresh air despite its pointlessness with his organless spirit body.

“What am I supposed to think?”

He shot a sharp retort before continuing.

“You obviously want my cooperation. Enough to help Shin become a visitant, that I understand. But you need to be more specific! You can’t just expect me to read your mind and be over and done with! You need to explain the situation more to me! What is happening here!?”

Now without the hands of peril looming around them, Ryosei poured out the questions that were stuck to his throat. Shin stood by a tree and silently watched the exchange.

“An explanation… yes, I do owe you that much at least. But, I’m sure you have no intentions of leaving it at that now would you, Ryosei?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, it’s what everyone wants: information. Just like everyone I’ve encountered, I’m sure you have no shortage of information you want to extract from me. And I can’t blame you, really. I’m a being that watches the entire Spirit Realm all at once. My vision even overflows to other worlds. Not as omniscient but enough to keep an eye on important figures. I know your enemies, your allies, your flaws, your gifts, the key to your victory, the pitfalls that can drop you to the spikes of defeat. How could you not want to know about them too?”

Ryosei only kept silent, reading deeper into the essence of the Entity’s speech.

“But… do you know, Scion of the Konjou, that information is a double-edged sword? If you keep asking people which path to take, then what are you supposed to do when no one knows the answer to your questions? If you reach the point where your knowledge matches all of the others around you, will you simply stand around and wait for someone to solve it for you? And, if you choose to make a move, would you even know where to begin and what to aim for? When all of your past experience is filled with using the knowledge of others, would you be able to dig for it on your own? I, for one, cannot see a fate other than a helpless man’s pitiful scramble.”

A stagnant filled the air—only for a second before Ryosei’s quick response. His voice echoed his smoldering heart. There was no flame; a controlled emotion, yet an emotion that reacted to the careless remarks that belittled his worth.

“I see what you mean. Don’t treat me like a child, Divine Beast.”

His regal stand struck the hearts of the other two spirits around him, eliciting a small grin from the eldritch mouth and a sharpened gaze from the black-feathered visitant. The way he parried the Entity’s diatribe exuded his lurking lion’s spirit, revealing not a boy lost for directions but a man demanding information to carve his own path forward.

“My legacy may have fallen to the title of ‘Delinquent Prodigy,’ but never have I forgotten the lessons of my loved ones. Especially, not after finding out the true name that my grandfather championed.”

Hero Konjou Masao. An ambassador of Earth. The eccentric who hid his own title so that Ryosei wouldn’t be burdened by the weight of his legacy. The teachings of his grandfather had always been to learn from him but never become him. He was acutely aware of how others regarded him as an oddity but nevertheless prided himself on his work and achievements. No harsh criticism or blatant slander would prevent him from reaching heights greater than before.

The man taught his children to become the best version of themselves, allowing them to grow with their own strength and reach their true potential. One of them became the clan’s chief and Masao’s influence affected even his son’s wife, bringing about two major figures as the Konjou Clan’s top, The Human Spirit, Konjou Hanzo, and God’s Enchantress, Konjou Reiko. Ryosei’s father and mother.

The teachings of his family never left his soul even once. It may have wavered, like when he asked Raqeav, the spirit smith who revived Kuro Yaiba, to teach him how to use his own weapon, but his family’s influence never truly disappeared. That was why he was quick to accept the reason why Raqeav turned away his plea, and at the same time, reflected on his actions. However, this time Enny talked down to him like he was making the same grave error despite not having done anything yet. She expected him to besmirch his family name yet another time. It made no small amount of blood boil but held his composure and regarded her with the same castigating tone.

“Just like how you think I should learn to respect your presence, I advise you to do the same with me. It is only right to do that especially since you are the one asking me for favors, am I wrong? If you do not want me to pry any more than I need, then just state it so. I don’t need you wasting my time with ridicule. If you want my cooperation, then strike this deal with me properly, Entity.”

Enny then closed her wide lips and collected herself, facing Ryosei with the respect he was due.

“Yes… yes, I apologize. It seems that I got ahead of myself. I take full responsibility and I plan to repay you by giving a generous amount of information that I deem you may need. With that being said, Konjou Ryosei, Scion of the Konjou, Grandson of the Hero, will you join hands with me in bringing back peace to the three worlds?”

A small pool of murky black appeared on the ground. A shadowy hand stretched out of it and opened for him to accept. Ryosei regarded it with sharp scrutiny before speaking.

“I do not know about taking on a heavy task like that. But for now, we seem to have the same objectives. Help me rescue Senkyo and resolve the current situation. The outcome will dictate my decision.”

The Entity let out a hearty laugh.

“Haha! Very well! I seem to have my work cut out for me! Do not doubt my words, Ryosei. My cause is just, and you will soon realize that the only key to a peaceful life is through seeing it be realized! Both for you and the anomaly you call a friend!”

The shadowy hand disappeared, as did the eldritch mouth that called herself the Entity. The last words he heard from her were a promise to return with more information before exiting. Silence spread through the air once more, allowing the slow clapping beside him to catch his attention.

“Kakaka! Picking a fight with the Divine Beast. Truly, I did not expect this development to happen! Kakaka!”

“What, do you want to do the same, Shin?”

“No, no, perish the thought. I just couldn’t be amused… and intrigued. I can see why she was so obsessed with having you on her side. Right!”

Shin walked up to Ryosei and took out his hand.

“Nothing as grand as the Divine Beast, just a handshake to signal our official partnership. Newborn that you are, there are many things you need to know about the Spirit Realm. I will be the one to show you the ropes! What I seek in return is only that you amuse me. I am easily bored, you see. And I feel like you are exactly what I need!”

Ryosei eyed Shin’s hand with the same scrutiny he did with Enny. He didn’t seem to be disingenuous, and unlike Enny, Ryosei could confirm the sincerity in his words. He really didn’t have any other reason than to kill some time. He thought about rejecting him but decided otherwise. His reason was simple, but that was what made him easy to trust and understand. However, since this act was purely on a whim, Ryosei didn’t plan on putting his entire faith in him but having him help him now was undoubtedly a good thing.

“Right… that would be great and all, but could you stop calling me a newborn? I’ve been ignoring it until now because there was so much on my mind but I just can’t let it stand.”

“Ka! Well, who was it that left me all by myself without giving me his name? I seem to recall giving mine but received a curt dismissal. I think I deserve my due respects as well, don’t you think, Newborn?”

“Uugh…”

Ryosei was reminded how he ended their last interaction. Since he was interrogating the first local of the Spirit Realm he encountered, he kept his name secret and never gave it to him. That being said, Shin should’ve been able to get that information from Enny, but just in case he was just looking to spite him, Ryosei disregarded it and moved to resolve the problem as soon as possible.

“That’s… my bad. I’m sorry. I’ll introduce myself again. I am Konjou Ryosei of the Konjou Clan, it’ll be a pleasure working with you.”

“Likewise. I am Shin of the Umbra Squall Tribe. May our partnership be a fruitful one.”

With their joined hands, a new relationship was forged.

**424 – Gathering of Lost Souls**

In a certain large room locked away from the masses contained six people. They gathered together in a round table to discuss an emergency. The silence was as solid as the mighty purple and yellow pillars that stood by the smooth blue walls tinted with purple and green. The edges of the floor took a rough stone-like texture and surrounded the design of a smooth black rose in the center where the floating marble round table was placed.

“So, who wants to explain what happened earlier?”

A single man cut through the thick stillness, his voice, gentle, but imbued with conviction. He had unruly brown hair. His head was adorned by a pair of goggles. Sharp sky-blue eyes overlooked the other attendants. He donned a brown cloak over his clothes but everyone present knew that beneath it was a coal-black set of complex gears and a tightly fit suit that was designed to carry those gears without impeding the wearer’s range of motion. Of the many people who came from various origins, not a single one could understand the extent of potential stored in his complex apparatuses.

“Someone infiltrated us and got away. What else is there to talk about?”

A sweet but self-important voice parried the otherwise tense atmosphere. It came from a woman with long golden hair that turned red at the tips. The most noticeable part about her was undoubtedly her foxlike ears and tail. She was what is often referred to as a fox spirit.

“If you insist on playing dumb, vixen, then why don’t we talk about how flimsy your barriers were? I swear, did your taste for men unscrew a few more bolts out of your head and go easy on that rat on purpose?”

A man with a humongous red frame with two large horns and a thick, white beard found her response unwelcome and decided to denounce her. He had the air of a mighty warrior. Red and brown ropes held his leather gear together, save for his bare, shirtless top which was embellished with dragons eternalized in a darker shade of red. An Oni.

“My, big talk for a big man who couldn’t even keep him in place. If you want to talk about failures then you should take a long, good look at the mirror?”

“What did you say!?”

“Enough.”

Before their exchange could escalate into a fight, the man in brown dismissed the two and slowly shook his head from side to side, tired of the two’s bickering and disappointed at himself for even allowing those two an opportunity to voice what was in their heads. Instead, he opted for a more reliable source of information.

“Yin, what’s the situation?”

The man addressed the girl with long grey hair arranged in a side braid ponytail. The black ribbon tying her hair together could be seen from over her left shoulder, allowing her silky grey locks to flow freely to her left side. Her bright, yellow eyes matched the man’s before speaking.

“My sources told me that the man is a spirited soul and was found inside Ground Zero. He was accompanied by a girl who seemed to be another spirited soul. I asked the guards who spotted him about what the two did but they apparently couldn’t recall what happened. They were under a strong influence of mental arts, and… as embarrassing as it is to admit… I was also taken by their influence. I’m sorry. I figured I could pretend to be under their control but their power was greater than I expected.”

The girl followed with a bow. It didn’t seem like she was planning on moving until she heard the man’s verdict.

“It’s fine, raise your head. There aren’t many that I know who can overpower your own mental arts. The fact that they were capable of subduing you speaks for their power. At the same time, it narrows down the list of suspects in mind. Just don’t let it happen again, okay?”

“Y-Yes!”

“Grouurgh!”

“Hehe, yeah, it’s just like what you said. Thanks.”

The girl spoke to what could be described as her polar opposite. It was a humanoid creature with pointy ears, red beady eyes, deathly sharp teeth long, and similarly lethal claws. Its body was a mix of blue and purple with an emaciated appearance and took a doglike posture. It looked like it belonged to a dying man, but its fast and sharp movements as it hopped back and forth in glee disproved this observation. The creature had bandages around all four of its limbs and more on its knuckles and soles. Aside from those, the only layer that could possibly pass as clothing was its brown, worn-out pants.

“Did Yang say something?”

“Oh, I-I was just a bit nervous. Honestly, I’ve never encountered anyone that skilled with mental arts before. Yang saw through me and cheered me up earlier.”

“As close as ever, the two of you are.”

The fox spirit couldn’t help but comment on their interaction.

“Hehe, thank you, Iroha-onee-sama.”

“My! What’s this, Yin-chan? I thought I gave you exclusive permission to address me more friendly! Come on, repeat after me. ‘Iroha-onee-chan~!’”

“I-Iroha-onee-chan!”

“Fufu, that’s better!”

“Okay, stop. You two can do more girl talk later. First, tell me everything and anything there is to know about these intruders—”

In the middle of the man’s sentence, the center of the round table began to warp. Its white, clean surface began to turn into murky shadows before an eerie mouth finally formed inside it.

“I see that you’re enjoying yourselves.”

The Entity appeared.

“You! What are you doing showing yourself so brazenly! Didn’t we have an agreement that you would keep any threat to us away from this place!? What is the meaning of this!?”

The oni roared with indignation, fury clear in his slowly reddening skin.

“Ah, we meet again, Yamagami Enju. I was about to address that topic. Calm yourself.”

The oni called Enju turned to the man leading the meeting. The man matched his gaze and nodded lightly, urging him to do as the Entity said. Enju took a deep breath, huffed in reluctance, and begrudgingly sat himself, making it clear through his grunt.

“Go on, then. Why did we have two intruders in Ground Zero, Enny? I thought you wanted our plan to succeed?”

“Let’s see… first, I would like to clarify that I never broke any promises. I said that I would keep any threats against our goal to take down the Invading God. Whether they are a threat to Black Rose in particular is not a part of our deal.”

“That so? From the sounds of it, you were the one who sent them there in the first place. I can’t imagine anyone sneaking past our security from the outside.”

“Correct you are, Hiroto. As expected of a former Di Manes. The two people I sent there just happen to be this generation’s Di Manes. I have high hopes for them if you still couldn’t tell.”

Hiroto began to stroke his chin as he processed her words.

“Hmm… New Di Manes, huh? Are you telling me to use them as sacrifices instead of Chouka? I’ve reasoned with you enough in the past. The fact that she bears remnants of Yuuki’s soul is the most important factor. Nothing is more crucial than that…”

Hiroto’s words slowly trailed off when he noticed the Entity chuckling softly.

“You misunderstand, Hiroto. Those two are the key. The light at the end of the dark tunnel. I believe that having those two grow will make the largest dent in the Invading God’s plans.”

The room fell into silence as all attendees shot sharp glances at the eldritch mouth.

“Okay.”

Hiroto reclined on his chair and placed his chin on his knuckles while he supported that arm with his other hand. With a single word, his tone sharpened into one that could kill. His mild-mannered voice turned to a ruthless one, the kind that would be directed to enemies instead of unruly allies.

“The key, you say? The only key we settled on was Ground Zero. Are you saying we should change that now? Enny, do you really think we would say yes to your every whim just because you’re the divine beast? You realize what kind of gathering this is, right? It’s the people who were wronged by change. The change that the Invading God mercilessly forced upon us. After everything we’ve worked on, you have the gall to come up to us and drive us in a completely different direction just because you think that something is ‘better?’ Don’t mess with us!”

All of a sudden, a sharp blade thrust from under the table, piercing through the Entity’s mouth.

“I was wondering if you would make a move, Togiya Yukito. Unfortunately for you, I am every bit invincible as the rumors say.”

The mouth on the round table was still. The voice that spoke came from the ceiling, where a similar mouth sprouted and talked to the group. Meanwhile, the mouth on the table slowly eroded, revealing a young man, a spirited soul wearing a navy blue gakuran with a matching cap. He stared sharply at the mouth above him as he brandished his sword. He was the single person who had yet to utter a word ever since the meeting began.

“Of course, I’m not foolish enough to expect any reaction from Black Rose other than this. What I came here to do was to warn you and to challenge you.”

Everyone kept silent, waiting for the Entity to continue.

“First, the Control Leader of END is now actively trying to invade the Spirit Realm. I thwarted her every time but with the large number of lackeys she has, expect for one or two to pop in for a split second. Well, from everywhere except this base. I still plan on keeping my end of the bargain despite everything, so if you do plan on going out, I suggest talking about highly confidential topics down to a bare minimum. Second, my challenge. It just so happens that I want to sharpen my key as fast as possible. So I’m planning to reveal the identities of the two who I brought here.”

“Oh, and what good would that do for us? Are you telling us to put a trial of fire for no reason?”

“Fufu, no, not at all. There is a very good reason why Black Rose will serve as the perfect trial. After all, securing even one of these two will guarantee your wish. Ground Zero will finally be able to progress again.”

“Are you saying that these two have the remnants of Yuuki’s soul?”

“I will leave that to your imagination.”

Hiroto stared at Enny silently before motioning with his head to continue.

“Konjou Ryosei and Chouka. They are my key.”

Hiroto’s eyes widened at the name. Chouka aside, there was one, every alarming name mentioned.

“Konjou… Ryosei? That old man’s grandson… I heard he died seven years ago… Hmm, so he turned into a spirited soul, huh?”

Hiroto took a peek at Enny. He didn’t mean for it to be a look for confirmation, but her wide, eerie sneer told him that he said something wrong.

“I do wonder… Well then, sacrifice them if you can. It would make for a fun show.”

With those parting words, every trace of the divine beast disappeared. Silence returned but was quickly broken by Yin’s voice.

“How do we proceed from here, Boss?”

“That’s… a good question.”

And so, the meeting proceeded with more questions than answers to solve them.

**425 – The Entity’s Lesson**

A week had quickly gone by. Today was the day that the Konjou Clan would send a search party to bring back Senkyo and Yuu. Ryosei and Chouka were supposed to be a part of them but this immediately changed when Enny properly explained the situation to the both of them.

The Control Leader of END, Vilane, approached Enny and challenged her to a fight for power. Specifically, one that was supposed to guarantee that Ryosei and Senkyo would become ambassadors of the new generation by empowering them. She explained that, in the past, ambassadors were more often chosen if they possessed more strength. Having Senkyo and Ryosei become stronger increased those chances. However, what Vilane didn’t know was that the names of the ambassadors of the new generation had long been decided. There was no changing them. If they realized that, then they would have kidnapped Senkyo and any other ambassador from Earth to realize their plot to kill all of the remaining gods who govern the three worlds.

But now, they were forced into a position where hiding that fact was no longer viable. A third of the ambassadors of the new generation were diving into a new world where the threats were incomparable to Earth. If they lost them because the Lost Maiden, Freda, didn’t bestow upon them their rightful power, then it would be like putting the cart before the horse. Her purpose was to withhold their power so that ambassadors would be safe from possible dangers, not to keep them from obtaining power.

With the Control Leader on the move, it was only a matter of time until she found out that the chosen ones had appeared. Everyone expected Senkyo to become an ambassador no matter what, so finding the existence of one while Senkyo remained unchanged would no doubt stupefy her. But, her ability was not to be underestimated. Enny was certain that once she found out that, despite not having the power, Senkyo was undoubtedly an ambassador, she would immediately take action and secure him without fail. Enny talked in a way that was adamant that securing Senkyo was set in stone. It wasn’t a matter of whether or not Ryosei and the others could stop her from capturing Senkyo, it was a matter of WHEN it would happen, which would be signaled by the Control Leader’s realization that Senkyo was an ambassador.

Enny continued to explain. Apparently, the 6th Hero, the traitor of the previous generation had put a curse on Senkyo. It was a mandate of absolute control, and the Control Leader had direct access to it. It didn’t matter what or where; once activated, Senkyo would lose conscious control and follow the orders of the holder. When Ryosei asked how the enemy managed to curse him, the Entity responded, unlike her omniscient self, “I don’t know,” she said.

Apparently, Senkyo had been cursed before Enny even knew about his existence, suggesting that the event never happened in the Spirit Realm, where her eye was absolute. The only reason she knew about this was because of Senkyo’s father, a Hero of the previous generation, Yukou Yuuto. He told her about the curse and how it would activate. Although he didn’t explain how or where Senkyo received such a curse, he did say that there was a way to break it.

When they arrived at this point of the conversation, Enny ended that subject there, claiming that she had no plans of revealing what to do to break Senkyo’s curse. Instead, she urged Ryosei to reach a certain goal. Becoming powerful was a given, but the core of the goal was something he couldn’t begin to comprehend.

“I need you and Chouka to be able to take on Black Rose, learn the secrets of the room I sent both of you to, and defeat the former Di Manes, Hiroto.”

He thought she was crazy but reminded himself that she always had been, making the statement a bit easier to swallow, not that it made it any simpler to achieve. He had trouble just trying to get out of their headquarters, and now she was asking him to be able to defeat them in a head-to-head battle. It was insane. From what he could tell, the five spirits that cornered him and Chouka were just the tip of the iceberg. At some point, he needed to face Hiroto, a former Di Manes. He didn’t know what he was capable of, but judging from the other two former Di Manes that he knew, the god of life and death, Mei and Shigo, it would not be a simple fight. If he were to be honest, he was expecting to eat dirt at Hiroto’s first attack.

Then, Enny tried to reassure him, saying that, unlike his Di Manes peers, Hiroto was not at the status of god. Before he could reach that point, his Empyrean Catalyst, the weapons given to Di Manes, disappeared along with the majority of his power. In the end, no one found out the reason for this mysterious event, forcing him to accumulate his power back from the ground up and be left behind while the others became gods.

Ryosei took this opportunity to ask a nagging question in his head.

“What is the difference between a spirit who reached the status of god and one of the three gods who separated Primo and created the three worlds?”

Enny seemed to have been expecting the question and answered immediately.

“In terms of power, there is no difference between them. Gods are gods. Theoretically, a spirit who reached the status of god could create a world of their own. The difference between the two is authority. The three original gods are able to make full use of their power while those who reached the spirit status of demigod and god have their capabilities limited. This was done to maintain order while raising potential talent… or so my father, Hades, explained to me. Even I, the Divine Beast, couldn’t completely comprehend what the god of the spirit realm was talking about.”

Ryosei took a silent pause of contemplation before poking at her words.

“You said authority… so who or what kind of being is in charge of giving that authority? Are you saying that there is some kind of higher being than a god beyond this world?”

“…”

“…”

“Ha… hahaha!”

She began laughing excitedly but, Ryosei couldn’t help but sense a tinge of fear.

“Perhaps so, perhaps not; who’s to say? To you, and to everyone who lives in the three worlds, I am a transcended being born from the direct hands of a god. But that is only because from where all of you stand, you can only see the top of the tower where I stand. To you, I may look like a perfect being with nothing that can threaten me. Nothing can overshadow me. But, from my perspective, from these heights, I can see so much more than any of you can. I know of the threats that appear beyond the clouds and the blue sky, and at the same time, I am awfully aware of there being possibilities of a threat that transcends even that. Higher beings aren’t as invincible as you think, Ryosei.”

“…”

“Think about it. If there was nothing keeping the Invading God in check, then they could just authorize local gods under his control and overpower the current ones. The fact that they don’t do anything other than occasional hint-giving using Fated Winds shows how a chain of command stands strong. Of course, if we’re lucky enough, then we might be able to live and die without having to deal with their godly strife. You might be able to live without needing to worry about anything that I said right now. It could all end up being useless information you got from any common grumbling… But, there is one thing that I should tell you. It’s a lesson that I received from my father.”

“…”

“Never underestimate the power of those who desire to live. For they, no matter how small they may look to higher beings beyond our comprehension, have the most potential to bring them down. It is not a matter of persistence, determination, arrogance, caution, passion, or any of the sort. It is the one, absolute rule of nature that no being, no matter how high, can escape. It is an eventuality. Just like how I will eventually meet an end, you will too.”

Ryosei couldn’t remember when he began holding his breath. Something about what the Entity talked about was unnaturally convincing. He asked the question prepared for any kind of response, but after that, he clearly underestimated the possibilities that the future held. There had never been a greater time that he wished for Senkyo to have been there in his stead, because it felt like a heavy burden was suddenly placed on his shoulders without him even realizing it. He wanted to let him do all of the thinking while he did the simple work of following his instincts. Unfortunately, the only one present was him, and it was he who initiated this conversation. He was reaping what he sowed.

“Okay, that about does it!”

In a cheery tone in complete contrast to the heavy atmosphere around Ryosei, Enny exclaimed happily as if breathing fresh new air after clearing the weight in her non-existent chest, to which Ryosei frowned.

“Don’t forget that you are already a part of my plans, Ryosei. I have high expectations for you and Chouka as representatives of the Spirit Realm. I kept my promise of filling you in on the situation. I suggest you do your end of the bargain, for everyone’s sake… Oh, and I already prepared your next challenge for you. Good luck!”

“W-Wait, what is that supposed to mean!? H-Hey!”

Like always, Enny disappeared before Ryosei could get a word out. He stared at the now-clean surface where the Entity’s mouth had been on, only to let out a tired sigh.

“…What did I get myself into?”

**426 – Troublesome Spirit Power**

*\*Slash! Slash! Slash!\**

“Ka! It seems like you’re getting the hang of this, Ryosei.”

“I’d be disappointed in myself if I wasn’t. Besides, we’ve been doing this for a whole week now.”

“Ka! That we are. I can only wonder why we haven’t found much success.”

Shin and Ryosei were in the Warped Territories fighting Predators to increase their spirit power. As a bonus, they could collect dark cores, but their main purpose was to have Ryosei learn more spirit skills. Unlike the techniques made for the Brute class and Enchanter class of the Konjou Clan, it wasn’t as simple as repeating a fixed string of moves. Spirit skills, in Shin’s words, were abilities that come to the user like a sudden epiphany that knew no date nor time when to appear. In other words, unless Ryosei had another sudden flash of inspiration like he did when he learned Flowing Thoughts, then his skill set of spirit skills wasn’t going to see any growth.

This was the one thing he disliked about using spirit power. It was a complex power system that relied on the user’s thoughts and emotions. Comparing it to its Zerid counterpart, magic had a defined process of how to bring about particular results. To create fire, one would use the fire element; to create a different branch of magic, one would use one of the main elements as a base like how wind magic was a derivation of the nature element; to cast magic, one would need to chant a spell or at least somehow control the mana they release to produce the desired result. They all had a definitive process that Ryosei could follow and use to create more techniques. That was what he did when he was alive as the Young Prodigy of the Konjou Clan.

However, spirit power was a whimsical sort. At times reliable, and in others unpredictable. It was, frankly, an inconsistent power source that could easily change as human emotions do. Granted, it did have its pros such as manifesting the will of the user just like how a Spirit Circuit could produce different effects that can either help or harm others depending on the will of the user. This was what helped Enchanters become a versatile class that could easily adapt to the enemies they faced.

If he was making techniques for the Enchanter or Brute class which both use spirit power, then perhaps he could make something work, but what he was trying to achieve was to create spirit skills. The difference between classes that used spirit power and spirit skills that came from spirits was the amount of spirit power being used. Humans still incorporated movement, their muscle mass, and other such factors. Spirits, however, have bodies made entirely out of spirit power. They were not bound by the same limits that humans were. This overwhelming degree of freedom meant more powerful and effective skills but this also left Ryosei at a loss as to how he could create another skill. The first thing he did was ask Shin, but he was right to assume that he wouldn’t retain any useful information the moment he began incorporating onomatopoeia into his sentences.

*\*Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!\**

“Ka. It looks like our time is up. Come, let us leave.”

Ryosei cleared the last remaining Predators around them and hurried to Shin, using Glimpse all the while, an ability that all types of spirits had that could peer into one of the other two worlds. He used it to scout the number of people around them and determine if it was safe to manifest themselves on Earth without causing a commotion.

“We’re in a public area in town. There’s a building right in front of us. Fly us up there and we should be fine.”

“Very well.”

Without Enny, their only means of escape from the Warped Territories was to retreat into other worlds. The Spirit Realm was divided into three sectors. The one they were currently on was the Earth-Spirit World, but none of that mattered when it came to the Warped Territories. In these accursed areas, the concept of having these three separate sectors was null and void. Whether it was, the Spirit World, Earth-Spirit World, or Zerid-Spirit World, what was considered Warped Territories stayed as Warped Territories.

They were absolute. However, that only applied to the Spirit Realm. The Warped Territories’ reach didn’t reach the other two worlds. This was proven when the Entity noticed the appearance of the Predators and the Warped Territories for the first time. She forcefully sent some to the two worlds to observe how they would react. As a result, it was common knowledge that Predators would simply dissipate from existence. This, too, was absolute, which made other worlds perfect sanctuaries from the Predators. However, she also noted that she did not know if the same applied to the overlord of the Warped Territories, Chaos, and its familiars, the Devils. But, so long as they stayed clear from them, nothing bad would happen.

The two locked their wrists before Shin spread his wings and flew into the sky. At Ryosei’s signal, Shin flew forward and both of them manifested onto Earth, escaping the dangers of the Warped Territories. Gone was the amaranthine land, and returned the refreshing blue sky above, the lush green trees below, the rising sun on the horizon, and the sight of unruined civilization.

“No dice, huh?”

“Ka, unfortunately so.”

Ryosei walked up and sat on the edge of the building, staring off into space. Regardless of whether he was in the safe confines of a peaceful land or one that was infested with monstrous beings, Ryosei couldn’t help but lament the amount of progress he was making, or rather, lack thereof. It was understandable to be down considering that at some point he would apparently face off with a former Di Manes. It wasn’t the type of fight that someone with half-assed skill would enter and leave with their lives. Perhaps sensing his depression, Shin placed a hand on his shoulder in an attempt to cheer him up.

“Ka. Do not fret, for it only serves to weaken your own potential. Many opportunities will show themselves to you. What you should worry about is recognizing them and acting immediately upon them.”

At Shin’s words, Ryosei found himself staring at him with widened eyes before letting out a light chuckle.

“Ka? Was there something funny about what I said?”

“…No, nothing at all. It just sounded so familiar to my friend’s fanciful interpretation of the moon. Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Ka… Well, you seem to be in a better mood than earlier so we’ll leave it at that. Let us meet again tomorrow at the same rendezvous.”

Without another word, Shin opened his wings and flew into the sky.

**…………**

“You have got to be kidding me…”

Ryosei uttered with exasperation the moment his cousin, the current chief of the Konjou Clan, Konjou Yousuke, explained to him the situation.

After roaming through the streets and returning to the Konjou Clan, Ryosei was immediately ordered to head to the Chief’s Office. There, he was made privy to the not-so-small incident that happened in the process of sending their rescue team to Zerid.

“…You’re telling me that Itsuki-san suddenly lost control of his body and damaged the teleportation circle? And even Sakurai-ojii-san couldn’t stop him?”

“Yes. He somehow slipped right through his hands. It didn’t seem like any magic was involved but you can never be too sure.”

The current clan head said while pinching the bridge of his nose.

“At any rate, all we can do now is hope that they’re all handling themselves over there. Just like Freda-sama said, her physical body is nowhere to be seen, so it's not like we can ask her to send another team to Zerid. I’ll do something about the issues here. Don’t mind me and focus on your objective. I just wanted to let you know what happened.”

“…Okay, got it.”

Taking the kindness of his cousin for sparing him the headache, Ryosei gave a quick bow before turning around and heading for the door.

“Oh, wait. I forgot about one more thing.”

“What is it?”

“Freda-sama said that she was going to give everyone their power as an ambassador once we performed the world-crossing. Did you get yours or did she only mean to give the ones who crossed?”

Ryosei paused in thought for a moment.

“I… don’t think so. I don’t feel anything different. Plus, she said something about searching for the Divine Weapons on our own. I definitely haven’t found anything.”

“I see. Well, that’s fine. If the subject ever comes up again then come to me. I know someone in the Spirit Realm who might be able to help.”

His head tilted in confusion at his words.

“You have connections with somebody from the Spirit Realm?”

“Of course I do. How do you think we got our hands on effective battle gear and the spirit weapons used in the annual battle royale?”

“Didn’t you say the clan’s blacksmiths made them?”

“Publicly, yes. Before Freda-sama came to aid our clan, we were under the impression that only a single world existed and that all spirits cause trouble, so outright telling everyone that we made connections with spirits was only going to end up terribly. Now that more people are getting to know that spirits aren’t always a threat, it might be a viable option, but for now, we still plan on keeping that a secret. At any rate, with Freda-sama’s help, a select few of us made connections with some spirits from the Spirit Realm. Technically, that statement is still correct since they make spirit weapons for us, but they are what we call a spirit smith. They also said that they retreated to Zerid before the Invading God could wipe their memories, so you might find him useful. Anyway, if you ever feel like meeting him then talk to me about it.”

“Okay, I’ll keep that in mind.”

**427 – The Memory of Home**

Ryosei finished his talk with Yousuke and went for a casual stroll around the clan village. He was looking for something to distract his mind and watch how others went about their daily lives. But, unlike the thought he had in mind of watching others silently from afar, many people came up to him and greeted him like a celebrity.

He was genuinely surprised. From the eyes of the Konjou Clan, he would be the first spirit they ever made connections with. The beings that they long perceived as enemies brought back the soul of a prodigious scion of the Konjou bloodline. After hearing something like that, it would be no wonder everyone was flocking to him. It was understandable. But the way Ryosei saw it, he was still someone who once abandoned their duty in an attempt to escape responsibility. The Delinquent Prodigy was what they used to call him. In his mind, that title was seared to his soul the moment he found himself dead in a traffic accident. Who could imagine him dying to something so mundane? A failure was how he saw himself, yet so many people were still coming to meet him with genuine smiles on their faces. Of course, there were still some who faked it to join the crowd but that didn’t matter since he could identify exactly who they were.

After finally feeling a bit overwhelmed, Ryosei left the clan and headed to a different place. One that was very dear to him. Down the mountain was a place that was lost to time. It existed only because he, who overcame death, still existed. It would not be an overstatement to say that place would have been eternally lost if it weren’t for Ryosei’s presence. It was a secret that no one else in the world knew other than him and his parents. It was also the place where he stored Kuro Yaiba before he left his life in the Konjou Clan behind when he was alive.

The barrier that protected the Konjou Clan was the second strongest of its kind. Meanwhile, the true strongest barrier was used to protect a single house. Ryosei’s mother who held the renowned title of God’s Enchantress built it in secret to serve as their family’s leisure home. Anyone who would attempt to enter it from the outside would be struck with the most natural urge to stay clear of the area, provoking not a single hint of suspicion from the sharpest of senses. But, to Ryosei, he could walk in as casually as it was returning home from a long day of work.

A run-down house came into view. Invincible it was to outside intruders, even this sanctuary couldn’t lock away the influence of time and nature. What was once a house that was so homely that it often made Ryosei want to lay down on the floor and sleep under the soft caress of the wind and the gentle touch of the morning sun, was now one that no one ever thought was livable. After returning to Earth about a week ago, Ryosei found himself returning to this place naturally to meditate and organize his thoughts. If he asked himself where home was, the image of this place would show.

Then, as he approached the abandoned building, he spotted something that left him in disbelief.

“What… in the??”

Over a single flat surface that survived on the house’s engawa was a girl with emerald hair wearing a white one-piece, donning the most comfortable smile she ever had as she took a nap exposed to the natural elements like he always had.

“Chouka!?”

There was no mistaking it. It was the daughter of the God of Life taking a leisurely nap on the crumbling porch. Ryosei didn’t know what to think of this and stared blankly at her for a few seconds before walking up to her and deciding he needed more answers than questions.

“Hey. Chouka, wake up. Hey…”

He shook her shoulders lightly. Perhaps thinking it was nothing but a bug, Chouka simply adjusted her sleeping posture. Right when Ryosei was about to get a bit stricter, the new position she shifted into made a disturbing creek on the floorboards. At that moment, it was too late.

*\*Crashhhh!!\**

Chouka’s body fell through the floor and dropped to the ground. He grimaced in second-hand pain and waited for a bit for the dust to settle. Surprisingly, there was no scream of terror. Chouka was a spirit which meant she couldn’t actually feel pain the same way humans do, but for some reason, Ryosei couldn’t get the possibility of her being too immersed in her sleep to notice the accident that just happened.

“Mgh… mnn… what…?”

From inside the large hole in the floor boards, Chouka rose while rubbing her eyes and yawing as if she had the most comfortable sleep in her life. For some strange reason, Ryosei wasn’t surprised… that was until he noticed one important fact.

“…Wait, a spirit… was sleeping…?”

He whispered to himself at the realization. Spirits didn’t need sleep. Unlike other living beings, their only source of power was their spirit power. They had no need for food, water, warmth, or sleep. But, for some reason, Chouka was having the time of her life enjoying the act as if she actually felt it. Not only that, both of them were still on Earth. Even if both of them manifested and allowed others to see them, they couldn’t actually make contact with anything physically. To spirits who pretend to blend in with the masses, they used an ability called Poltergeist, one that allowed them to control or produce sound and control or fine-tune objects. It was used in tandem with the spirit’s movements, making it seem to others that they were actually making contact with other objects. But, what happened with Chouka was that she physically placed more weight on the floor she was sleeping on and caused it to crumble. There was no use of any spirit power there. She TOUCHED it.

“…Ah, Ryo-chan! You’re finally here! I’ve been waiting for so long!”

She called out to him excitedly and walked up to him. She didn’t even bother questioning why or how she ended up under the floorboards.

“Look! What do you think?”

She did a classy swirl as if to show off some new clothes and stared at him expectantly. She was clearly waiting for him to compliment her or something similar to that effect, but he had no idea why. She was still wearing the same clothes and nothing about her seemed to have changed. After activating all of his neurons to survive this sudden ambush of choices, he opted for one thing only.

“Uhh, you look great?”

“Hehe! I know right!?”

A very broad compliment. The one thing he was certain about was that she was referring to her looks. If he just complimented her looks, then all was fine—

“Hey, tell me what’s so great about it? I don’t have a mirror so I can’t tell!”

“U-Umm, everything…”

“Oh, come on! You can do better than that!”

—And down goes that ship…

“No, wait, never mind that. How were you able to touch the floor earlier?”

“What?”

“You’re a spirit, right? There’s no way you used poltergeist while you were asleep.”

That was fine. Ryosei took the chance to change the topic and point away from whatever fashion statement Chouka was trying to go for.

“But… you complimented me about it… didn’t you?”

“O-Oh… I did?”

Only to realize that the direction he was pointing to was a minefield that blew up any type of social feigning he attempted. Eventually, after he survived the awkward silence and the earful that Chouka gave him afterward, she filled him in on what was actually happening.

“…Your Empyrean Catalyst?”

“Yep! This is what the Di Manes get as a bonus for having the title of ambassador! You should have it too, so show me yours!”

“Wait, what? No, you haven’t even explained everything properly! How do YOU even know that I have it? Didn’t Freda-san say something about having to search for them?”

At his words, a wide grin appeared on Chouka’s face. She puffed her chest out confidently and crossed her arms.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk, Ryo-chan, you really have a lot to learn. Well, that’s why I’m here! Your reliable big sister will tell you all about what you need to know!”

There it was. The smug look that appeared every time Chouka was about to enter a boastful prattle. Ryosei wanted no part of it, but unfortunately for him, he was her target and he wanted answers from her. This poor alignment of motives pointed to only one action, one that Ryosei didn’t want to take if it was avoidable. Alas, nothing would save him from that fate, especially not the rational part of his mind that urged him to bite the bullet.

“Ugh…! Fine, fine. Go on, tell me what I don’t know, Chouka-nee-chan.”

“Hehehe~ well, if you really insist, then I suppose I’ll enlighten you!”

Ryosei wanted to bury his head under the ground while he kept on pretending to act the clueless little brother role. At least he got the information he wanted.

**428 – Empyrean Catalyst**

According to Chouka, Ryosei was making a huge misunderstanding. When Freda announced that they needed to find their Divine Weapons, she was only addressing the Heroes present in the room. As for him and Chouka, who were Di Manes, this didn’t apply. There was a different system in set for blessing someone with an Empyrean Catalyst. Unlike Divine Weapons and Gjia Eaixihs, Empyrean Catalysts were embedded directly into the souls of the owners. This meant that they could not pass their power to anyone else without the help of one of the three gods, which almost always guaranteed that they would be retrieved, save for the Empyrean Catalyst that Hiroto mysteriously lost. This also meant that it was more likely to hand the power down to anyone who had a direct connection to the Di Manes with the Empyrean Catalyst.

Just like how Chouka had a direct connection with her mother, Mei, she inherited the Empyrean Catalyst she once held. She then added that if Ryosei held the Empyrean Catalyst that she had in mind, then that meant he inherited Yuuki’s Empyrean Catalyst. When Ryosei asked why, she reasoned that it was likely because he was the owner of the Pseudo-Divine Weapon that held Masayoshi, the spirited wisp who absorbed the majority of Yuuki’s spirit power just before he perished. Ryosei also didn’t miss her little slip-up with words suggesting that she got that theory from her mother.

“So that means I already have an Empyrean Catalyst, huh? Do I actually? I don’t feel anything different.”

Chouka slowly shook her head at Ryosei’s dubiety.

“Remember, Ryo-chan, these blessings from the gods weren’t made to cause harm. They were made to protect their holders and help them make peace with other worlds. If having these weapons always made you and everyone around you tingly then no one would think you meant good. The first and foremost purpose of Empyrean Catalysts is this!”

She jogged up to the broken house and picked up a piece of wood. She then pointed it at Ryosei and ordered him.

“Touch it!”

Letting results speak for themselves, he beat down the doubts he had in mind and attempted to touch the solid object without using any help from Poltergeist.

“I… can touch it…? What?”

Ryosei was still in his spirit form. Although he looked like a normal human being from the outside, physical objects would continue to ignore his body… or at least, that should have been the case. But, for some reason, he could easily make contact with the piece of wood Chouka had.

“Empyrean Catalysts allow us spirits to become like humans. They are physical bodies that let us understand how non-spectral creatures live and feel. It even allows us to share this experience with other spirits just by touching them! Isn’t that great, Ryo-chan!?”

Her eyes sparkled brightly at Ryosei, like a child that had a whole new world open up to her, literally. Chouka, who always lived like a spirit, didn’t know what it meant to feel physical pain, the taste of food, the touch of the sun, the cool breeze, or anything that involved the senses that humans and other living creatures had. Thinking about it, there was no wonder he found her like she was living in heaven. The surge of foreign sensations must have hit her all at once, allowing her to derive delight in things that non-spectral beings would find normal.

“It really is…”

He agreed while swinging around the solid piece of wood Chouka handed to him with keen interest.

“Then, what other uses does it have? You said it’s used to protect its holders, so it has to be useful in battle somehow… Oh, and can you teach me how to use mine… Hm? Chouka?”

But, when he shifted his gaze to Chouka’s face, he suddenly found her with puffed cheeks and was giving him one of her miffed scowls.

“W-What?”

“Is that all you ever think of?”

She shot a with a reproachful tone.

“What do you mean?”

The genuine cluelessness in his words made her eyes twitch and her teeth show.

“Fighting! I’m talking about your obsession with fighting!! We finally have these wonderful bodies that make us feel, smell, taste, and all you can think of is how it can be weaponized? Come on, we aren’t soldiers, we’re ambassadors! Ambassadors are supposed to make peace, not find war! How do you think we’re supposed to explain ourselves when they find out that you’re a battle maniac that only uses the gods’ blessing for violence!?”

Finally snapping, she placed Ryosei under her furious lambasting once more. These were no longer second-hand information she received from her mother. The one talking was Chouka, and she was pulling out every word from the bottom of her heart. Ryosei was taken aback a bit. He was reminded that Chouka wasn’t some clueless girl. She actually had wits under her childish behavior, which was what drew his interest in her in the first place. She made a valid point in normal circumstances, but this was not one of those, which kept him from surrendering complete control of the situation to her.

“You have a point, but you’re also being unreasonable. I believe that Enny told you all about the situation. We’re currently under the pressure of a leader from END. If we fail this, then there’s no telling how much damage this will do to us. I’m just trying to plan out what I can and get as strong as possible.”

“That’s the problem! Can’t you see!? You’re a spirit now, Ryo-chan, not a human! You can’t always plan out success! The best way for us to become stronger is to gather various experiences and be free from worry!”

“Are you telling me to live like you do? I don’t mean to be rude, but I disagree. If you tell me to be ‘free from worry,’ then distracting myself with other matters only complicates the situation. I think it’s YOU who needs to take a step back and take a look at the bigger picture. I’m not you, Chouka, I am Konjou Ryosei, and I can’t just throw caution to the wind as you do!”

“I’m not that reckless! I’m just telling you to enjoy other things too! There’s so much more about life than fighting! Just look at how beautiful this place is! Who in their right mind would want to make this place a battlefield and destroy its beauty? I’m not telling you to get distracted; I’m saying that there’s a time and place for everything! Does seeing a place like this make you think that battle is appropriate here!?”

Ryosei held back his breath. For once, Chouka said something that he couldn’t agree with more. This place was his precious home with him and his parents. Whenever they wanted to be free from the responsibilities of the clan, they would always find themselves here. The idea of this place getting trampled under combat was not something he could swallow.

At the same time, a pang of guilt flowed through his chest. After all, he was the very person who reduced their once prominent home to shambles. Just like the time when Senkyo trapped him in his body and used Kuro Yaiba’s release factor, he was reminded of the shameful incident that happened once in the distant past. The reason why their house was brought to such a tragic state wasn’t all because of nature’s hand.

When both of his parents died at the same time, he sought to escape reality by hiding in this place. That was when, somehow, some kind of monster breached their special place and attacked him. His vision quickly went red in rage and activated Kuro Yaiba’s release factor to slay whatever it was in one second. The threat went away as quickly as it arrived but at the cost of destroying their own home. With that in mind, he couldn’t find it in him to continue arguing any longer.

“Ugh… fine, we’re not getting anywhere in this conversation. I just need to try new things for a bit, right?”

A wide smile appeared on Chouka’s face.

“Yes! Even just for a bit! That’s all it’ll take for me to show you I’m right!”

She declared, gesticulating animatedly to drive home her point. Her seemingly infinite reserves of energy drew out a tired sigh from Ryosei.

“Sure, sure. But just so we’re clear, I still think I’m right.”

“I’ll make you eat your words!”

“Okay, then how about starting by teaching me all I need to know about my Empyrean Catalyst?”

“Gotcha! It’s really simple, you see…”

**429 – Fresh Experiences**

“I thought both of us were supposed to get tired…? Why does it feel like it’s just me?”

“Ryo-chan! Come on, it’s time to try that photo booth thing!”

Chouka waved at him from down the hall. There were quite a few noticeable changes from her. The same went for Ryosei. Turning back the hands of time, when she finished teaching Ryosei all he needed to know about his Empyrean Catalyst, the two went back to the Konjou Clan and explained the situation to Yousuke, telling him all about what Chouka had in mind. To both of their surprise, she had a very intricate plan on what to do if she ever got herself an Empyrean Catalyst. She produced a small pocketbook with a list written with all of the things she wanted to do.

While Ryosei and Yousuke were arranging everything for their little excursion later, Chouka was being tended to by one of the Konjou Clan’s hunters. As one might expect, the moment Chouka set foot back into the Konjou Clan, she immediately went sightseeing and tried out everything she could. Unlike before, they weren’t here for any emergencies so they could take their time. This meant playing with the local kids, buying from nearby stalls, and generally touching everything she could get her hands on. If Ryosei hadn’t convinced her there were more interesting things inside the mountain castle, they likely would have seen no progress.

As for how he got her to move, he told her all about their indoor hot springs, leisure areas, and their comfy guest rooms. All of which she was currently going through while the attendant Yousuke assigned to her kept her in control. Although both he and his cousin were getting dizzy from her bursts of energy, she saved them the headache of having to explain the complicated situation to the hunter. This was because no one could tell her apart from a normal human, so she was easily passed off as “an important person,” without needing more context. They used this same excuse to prepare a route around town that all had some form of connection to the Konjou Clan. And by the time Chouka had her fill of the Konjou Clan’s mountain castle, everything was thoroughly arranged.

The two went to town with a spring in Chouka’s step, feeling refreshed with the Konjou Clan’s treatment. She talked all about her first experience bathing, and at a hot spring at that. Half of their trek to town was made up of bath conversations while the latter was about the luxurious room she stayed in for a while. The last part was mostly about beds. Before she could get through half of what she wanted to talk about, the two arrived at their first destination which was a hair salon.

Chouka wanted two things done: get a haircut and her hair dyed. While they were on their way, Ryosei asked her what haircut she wanted in particular, to which she immediately responded.

“I want a wolf cut!”

“A wolf cut? You mean the one that extends down your shoulders? Why?”

“Because! It sounds cool!”

“…Right, of course.”

Hearing this, Ryosei posed a problem to her. Since her current hair was a bob cut, there wasn’t enough heir to actually make a wolf cut possible… or so it seemed until she smiled brightly and made her short hair grow long in less than a few seconds. Chouka and Ryosei had Empyrean Catalysts as bodies instead of actual human ones. One of the unique traits of their god-given bodies was their ability to morph them at will, just like how a spirit would in their spirit body.

When they went inside the hair salon, they were greeted by people Ryosei assumed to bear some kind of connection with the Konjou Clan, seeing as they were the ones who asked for them directly. Chouka wasted no time in telling them exactly what she wanted. Ryosei planned to go to the waiting area, but she refused to let him go without joining her.

“If you don’t do this with me, then how am I supposed to prove that I’m right? You agreed to try new things, didn’t you? Besides, we both know that you can revert every change if you want to!”

She had a point. With his Empyrean Catalyst, even if he didn’t like his haircut, he could just turn it back to how it was in the first place. In reality, the two didn’t need to go through this whole process of changing hairstyles and dyeing them, but Ryosei knew that Chouka would throw another fit if she heard him voice those words aloud. She made it clear in their last argument. She wasn’t there for results. She was there for the experience. Not wanting to drag everything out more than they had to, he reluctantly accepted and joined Chouka.

The two left the salon in a few hours. Chouka’s hair turned from a long emerald to a short haircut with long extensions that reached her chest. Her pure emerald hair was adorned by a mix of purple that appeared on random strands on the bottom part of her hair, keeping the top part pure green while the bottom, where the tips of her short hair and her extended hair had bits of purple.

On the other hand, Ryosei went for a simple perm but kept the extended part that was tied by a red string on the left side of his hair untouched. As for dyes, he went for white combined with a similar style that Chouka had, but instead of having them color his bottom part, he had them color random strands of hair white regardless of location. As a result…

“Pfft…! R-Ryo-chan, hehe, y-you look like an old man. Are you sure you wanted it like that… pftt…!”

“It’s fine… I think using other colors would make me stand out more.”

Her poor attempt at hiding her laughter aside, Ryosei didn’t particularly mind. To him, everything would be over in a day like nothing had changed.

Their next destination was just a few minutes away. It was a mall where Chouka wanted to buy some clothes. There, Ryosei—

“Ryo-chan, look! Doesn’t this one look cute!? Oh wait, won’t I look beautiful on that one? Hmm… hey, Ryo-chan, do you think I should get a sexy-looking one too?”

“Sure, that’s what you want, right?”

“How about sleepwear?”

“So long as it isn’t anything too inappropriate.”

“Oooh? What? Were you expecting something?”

“Pft.”

“WHAT!? Hey! You just blew your nose at me, didn’t you!?”

—was surprisingly resilient! He kept up with Chouka’s pacing and even gave valid criticism whenever she asked for them. There wasn’t anything that he kept her from buying as long as they kept within the budget that the Konjou Clan gave them. He refused when he needed to and was quick to make decisions whenever Chouka prompted him with some. Unbeknownst to Chouka, Ryosei was used to being his mother’s carrier whenever she felt like going on a shopping spree. He was full of complaints at first, but soon, experience told him that the fastest way to end everything was to escort her through the most efficient path possible while making decisions for her through suggestions and opinions, all the while discretely blocking her vision on troublesome selections that seem like she would take too much time in.

The whole process went smoothly… or so it should have until it came to his turn.

“Okay. I already have everything I have in mind… huh? Chouka?”

“Ryo-chan! Look! Try this one on! Ah, and this one too! You look like an old man so they might actually look good! What are you waiting for? Get back in the changing room!”

“…Eh?”

Apparently, what Chouka meant about shopping for clothes included her part in choosing his clothes. In other words, while he made swift decisions for her clothing, Chouka placed the same amount of clothes in his hands, but instead of leaving him the right to choose which clothes he wanted, she wanted to be the one to make some of the decisions for him this time. And, just as he expected, she was very slow and wishy-washy.

“Ohh… I think these were good but so were those… Wait, maybe there’s something better. I need to take the budget into consideration too…”

In the end, his patience was still tested.

“Mmm!! This is delicious! It’s so… watery!! What is this!?”

“It’s called a steak, and I think the word you’re looking for is ‘juicy.’”

“Juicy!! So that’s what this is!?”

The two went for a quick lunch break before continuing. They opted for a local restaurant that didn’t have a long wait. Ryosei secretly chose one that was a little more on the expensive side so that he could use the budget as an excuse so that Chouka wouldn’t end up buying an entire feast. Surely enough, his plan worked and forced her to choose her meal wisely. Everything was going fine so far, but he couldn’t get the nagging feeling that he was receiving more stares than usual. Perhaps it was their clothes, he thought.

Chouka chose to wear a two-piece checkered dress. One with a white frilly long sleeve and a green dress with a checkered pattern over it. In addition, she also picked up a green and purple butterfly hairclip to keep some of her bangs aside.

Ryosei ended up with a red and black checkered shirt jacket to match Chouka’s dress, which was her choice. He donned a white and red striped shirt under it and had black cotton pants for his bottom. Chouka also got him an accessory which took the form of a chain pendant that held a steel ring. As for why it was this, it was a better alternative than having a skull pendant that Chouka prepared because of the god of death’s influence.

Ryosei thought that, to others, the two must have looked like a close pair of siblings with how much she was dragging him all around and even forcing him to wear matching clothes with him. That thought was short-lived.

“Hey, hey, look at those two. Do you think they’re a couple?”

“What are you saying? Of course, they are! No one wears matching clothes paired with those stylish looks if they aren’t with their lover! Guuuuhh…! They even look so close it’s frustrating!!”

“Why can’t I have a person like that…?”

“My thoughts exactly…”

Ryosei turned his attention back to Chouka who was too busy savoring her food to notice the gossiping happening around them and shrugged his shoulders. If she didn’t make a fuss out of it, then there was nothing to worry about.

A bit later, the two then headed to the arcade where Ryosei felt like he was reaching his exhaustion point. They played so many games that he couldn’t remember how many round trips they made around the entire arcade, and Chouka was still going! It was a feeling that Ryosei hadn’t felt in a long time. Physical exhaustion.

With his new Empyrean Catalyst, it allowed him to experience what it meant to be tired in the truest sense once more. Despite this, Chouka seemed like she was far from running out of gas in her tank. Not only did he have to go around the entire arcade, he had to do it while carrying the bags that had the clothes they bought. His final saving grace was when she finally decided to go to the photo booth, which he told her was supposed to only be used at the end of their arcade trip. He strictly forbade her from going inside the photo booth without promising that they would leave the arcade afterward, saying that it was somewhere along the lines of “tradition” and “etiquette.” Sure enough, his plan worked out as planned… well, partly, since this also triggered her to play even more games before finally deciding to end her gaming spree.

**430 – Common Irrationality**

After leaving the arcade behind, the two headed for a place that was more familiar to Ryosei. Honshou Academy.

“I’ve never been to school before! This is so exciting!”

“Don’t get your hopes too high. We got permission under the Konjou Clan’s connections but we’re not actually going to be students or anything. Besides, it's almost sundown so there’s not really much to see.”

“Aw! Don’t be such a downer! There are always things to see!”

“If you say so. Oh, by the way, we’re stopping at the nurse’s office. You-chan said they’d have the uniforms for us prepared.”

“Yay! I thought getting uniforms was too much but I guess the Konjou Clan is ready for anything, huh?”

“Hmm, I don’t know about that. You-chan usually takes care of this kind of work. But I don’t think it should’ve been hard negotiating… considering the name of the school.”

“‘Honshou’ Academy… Then it really wasn’t a coincidence…”

Ryosei recalled the time they met the spirit smith, Raqeav. When he asked him to tell the names of the last generation’s ambassadors, he didn’t miss the fact that one of them had the same name as this school. Honshou Mirai.

Ryosei dug through the Konjou Clan’s records the past week and even asked Yousuke about it. He found out that the owner of the school was none other than Honshou Mirai’s parents. They were one of the few who were spared from the Invading God’s influence. At the time the incident happened, they were making preparations to construct a branch school at the capital of the Uikakrn Kingdom. As anyone would expect, they were distraught when they heard of what happened with their daughter. So much so that they resented the Konjou Clan and the ambassadors who survived the incident for a time.

They felt wronged. It was unjust, they claimed. How could they come back without their daughter? Everything they did to reason with the mourning couple landed on deaf ears. They cursed the Konjou Clan and the other ambassadors because of it and even caused issues for them for a few years. But then, the issue was resolved by Akira Leo, one of the Heroes who survived. It happened suddenly, but it turned out that Leo had always been trying to figure out a way to calm their malice. After that, the parents forged an alliance with the clan and made Honshou Academy a place that sought to find possible ambassador candidates.

Ryosei was surprised to find out at first, but it made sense. After all, he knew the truth. Six of the fifteen current ambassadors appeared in their school. Having about half of the ambassadors appear in their school was no small feat. It was something that was only achieved through their networking and tireless amount of work. Searching the background of students who made contact with other worlds, ones who were involved with them in the previous timeline before the Invading God overwrote their history, and other such factors.

Of course, the thought of asking Freda, the only person who knew about the identities of all ambassadors, came to mind. But, just like Enny’s stance about information, she refused to reveal them.

“…I never met her parents. But, Mirai-onee-san was a nice person.”

“I heard the same.”

In contrast to Ryosei’s information, Chouka had direct contact with the Hero in question. When she was still a wisp, she met and saw all of the ambassadors. This included the 6th Hero, the traitor who carried the will of the Invading God. Ryosei thought about asking her about them but quickly dismissed it. He wasn’t stupid enough to bring up such a heavy subject when her goal was clearly to enjoy her time in her new body. He needed information, but it wasn’t that urgent. It wasn’t like he was about to face the 6th Hero off by the end of the week. If anything, he wanted information about Hiroto, but for the same reason, he held his tongue and decided to let the day pass without touching the subject.

“Ryo-chan! How do I look?”

“It suits you. You look like an actual high school girl.”

“Heheh, that’s nice. But you’ve got something wrong. Just for today, I AM a high school girl!”

She puffed out her chest and placed her right hand on it while the other one on her hips, taking an assertive pose. Her navy blue blazer and her pleated skirt fluttered slightly at her sudden force.

“I guess you are. My bad.”

“Fufu, okay, enough of that. I want to explore the school! Ah! The cafeteria! Where’s the cafeteria!?”

“H-Hey, wait! It’s already closed by now! Haven’t you heard of no running in the halls!?”

Chouka already hurried off before Ryosei could stop her. The students left in the school were few, but not empty. With the two traveling to and fro, it was no wonder that many eyes had been on them. None of them actually approached them, but that was the least of their worries. What Ryosei wanted to avoid the most was running into a staff member and chasing them out of school. They had permission to enter, but they couldn’t afford to inform all of the staff. To function as an incognito school for gathering possible ambassador candidates, they needed to hire people who had completely normal backgrounds. The people who knew the two would cover for them, but the best-case scenario was to not encounter that kind of trouble in the first place.

After Chouka’s adventurous spirit calmed down slightly, Ryosei suggested they go to the music room, remembering that Chouka was good with the flute. She immediately latched onto the idea and obediently followed him around.

“Wow! There are so many instruments!”

“Well, that’s what the music room is for.”

Chouka wasted no time and picked up a guitar among the plethora of musical apparatuses. She played it, and just like any other beginner, produced an irregular rhythm with an atonal structure.

“Whoaa! So this is what a guitar is like!”

She continued stringing the cords until she got a bit better. Satisfied, she set the guitar down and went for another instrument. The process repeated itself while Ryosei silently watched over her with curious eyes. The orange light of dusk was about to fade away from beyond the windows. He thought of turning on the lights but decided against it, wanting to know how Chouka would react to it. And, she was completely unfazed. Her progress with the instruments neither slowed down nor did a bothered expression cloud her face. She was completely in her element. For that reason, Ryosei couldn’t help but ask.

“Hey, Chouka, how did you come to like music and learn instruments? You just seem to get the hang of them so quick.”

He didn’t miss her skill with the instruments. She may have had a terrible tune at first, but never did she have to take any longer than five minutes to improve. He would call it talent, but he didn’t know enough about music to be certain about anything. Besides, he never forgot that she was still a spirit. That could have some kind of unknown factor.

“That, huh…? Actually, I learned all about music and instruments from Yuuki. He loved them, and so did I. He would always teach me in his free time, so I know a lot but I’ve never been able to play anything when I was a wisp. When I became a spirited wisp, I was able to play the flute, but nothing else. Playing instruments using poltergeist just felt wrong to me, so it was always the flute for me.”

“Yeah, I get that. There are just some things you can’t do as a spirit… wait, but can’t you just turn your flute into another instrument?”

He asked, manifesting Kuro Yaiba, shaping it into a flute, and reverting it back to its normal form, demonstrating the ability to mold his weapon at will. She let out a wry smile before shaking her head ever so gently.

“No… no, I can’t. I’m not weird like you are, Ryo-chan.”

She said teasingly, albeit mixed with a slight hint of mockery.

“If I was just like Maccha, then maybe, but I never got much of Yuuki’s spirit power to begin with. Besides, spirited souls shouldn’t even have the ability to morph their weapons, yet you can do it without even being at the Spirit status. It’s infuriating, you know!”

Chouka purposefully raised her voice to throw off the heavy atmosphere, but the truth in her words failed to escape her. Ryosei kept his silence. She let out a bitter laugh and stopped tapping the keys of the piano she was playing. She raised her head from the piano keys and saw that it was already nighttime. She was so immersed in her music that she failed to notice how late it was. Though, she didn’t seem to mind the darkness.

“I’m just like any other spirited soul. I was originally a wisp, but otherwise no different… Maybe that’s why Hiroto-nii-san wants me as a sacrifice.”

His brows raised and soon furrowed.

“…What do you mean?”

Ryosei thought about letting the subject go, just like what he planned originally, but something inside him screamed that he wouldn’t have another chance to pursue the subject if he didn’t act now.

“Hiroto-nii-san was a good guy. He was Yuuki’s best friend so I often interacted with him. But… after me and Masayoshi became spirited wisps through Yuuki’s spirit power, the thought of reviving him using us never left his mind. At first, he just wanted samples but it soon became worse until he outright asked for our sacrifice. Of course, Mom was furious and chased him away. I’ve never seen him ever since, but I always knew he was behind the assassination attempts on me. There have been a lot more than at the time we met, Ryo-chan.”

“Then, why did you even decide to run off in the first place? Did you WANT to die?”

She faced him and met his eyes. The gentle moonlight from the window reflected off her optic pearls and bathed her body in a lunar glow.

“Who knows…? I just wanted to meet him and talk with him for a bit. I never hated him… But, I’m still scared. I only realized that when we ended up in Black Rose’s territory. Do you know what came to my mind when I realized where we were? …I wanted to go home. I wanted to run away. I didn’t want to see Hiroto-nii-san. I… didn’t want to die. Haha… confusing, isn’t it? Even though I was the one who went out looking for trouble.”

“…Yeah, it is.”

Ryosei raised Kuro Yaiba and showed it to her.

“Everything is, really. At one moment, you’re doing this, and the next you see yourself doing the complete opposite. At one time you think you know everything until the world makes you learn the truth the hard way… That’s been me in the past month or so. Seriously, I didn’t want to sign up for some suspicious world-saving mission. I was just some degenerate who left everything behind. I didn’t want any of this.”

“Hehe, looks like I’m not alone.”

A small smile appeared on her face, amused by his self-pity.

“Then, I told you mine, what about you? Why are you here, Ryo-chan?”

“Me… huh? Well, to repay someone, first and foremost. Without Senkyo, my soul would still be rotting at the place where I died… I thought I could just live as a spirit like that until my second death arrived, but I don’t know anymore. I mean, I didn’t expect to find another human body! No one would! If I live… you said that if I survive as an ambassador, then I can keep this body, right?”

“Yes. Just like Mom, Shigo, and Hiroto-nii-san, the physical body they received was only a side effect of possessing an Empyrean Catalyst. Even if the power of the Catalyst leaves, the body would remain. It also doesn’t age, so you can be eternally young…”

“Hahaha… a second shot at life… You can understand why it’s all confusing, right?”

“Hehehe, it really is. Nothing makes sense… But, I guess that doesn’t matter since we’re already here, and neither of us can seem to get out.”

She flashed a mischievous grin.

“If you want to understand something, then you’ll just have to live more and find out.”

Ryosei let out a soft chuckle.

“You do know I’m technically dead, right?”

Chouka got up from her seat, walked up to Ryosei, and climbed up the desk in between them. She looked down at Ryosei with her elevated gaze and Ryosei matched it. She was just like the moon, with only one side of her body clearly illuminated while the other dimmed, imitating the waxing gibbous. The unusually mesmerizing sight made him hold his breath. She touched the tips of his lips and stretched both of his cheeks outward. Her white teeth showed along with her widening smile.

“Really? You look a bit too happy for someone who’s dead.”

For a second, he paused. Then, Ryosei raised his hand, swept aside Chouka’s, and squeezed her cheeks even harder in retaliation.

“Cheeky little brat!”

“—Ahhny, mynoouu!! Shtaarnp!! Nyaai sheeksh!! Ehersh! Eheeersssshhh!!”

(—Ahh, noooo!! Stoooop!! My cheeks!! It hurts! It huuuuurrtss!!)

She tried to struggle out but the prodigy’s hold was too tight to escape from. The small commotion ended a few seconds later resulting in Chouka’s red cheeks and a satisfied smile on Ryosei’s face.

“I guess changing paces is important after all.”

“Don’t say that after assaulting a young lady!”

She sent daggers through her gaze, which he easily parried.

“Phrasing, Chouka. You’d get me in trouble for something strange if you keep doing that.”

“Then stop doing things that make me want to get you in trouble!”

Ryosei brushed off Chouka’s rebuke and changed the subject.

“At any rate, we should go now. I still have to meet up with Shin later.”

“What do you mean? We still have one place to go!”

“What? You know we can’t actually finish off your list today, right? There were so many things written in there that a year won’t be enough.”

“I know! But I still want to go to one last place! Come on, it won’t even take that long!”

“You say that but… where do you even want to go?”

“A café!”

**431 – The Master’s Strange Request**

“So the café you wanted to go to was… Savor Soul.”

“Yep! I heard it’s great here! But Mom never let me come here since she didn’t want to risk seeing Hiroto-nii-san. I asked them to escort me but apparently, it would make too much of a commotion.”

“Well, they are gods.”

Ryosei and Chouka arrived at the front doors of the famous leisure place in town. They had to switch back to the clothes they wore after shopping and left the uniforms where they got them. Ryosei eyed the entrance for a bit. He remembered trying to enter in the past when he was suddenly pulled into the Spirit Realm by some kind of soldier-cum-manager and threatened to kill him if he didn’t explain himself. In the end, they let him go without issue but he couldn’t help but be doubtful of trying it another time.

“Why did you choose this again?”

“What do you mean ‘why?’ It’s the only establishment that operates both on Earth and the Earth-Spirit World in the area. It's popular in both worlds, you know? Anyway, don’t just stand there, let’s go!”

“Hey, don’t pull!”

Chouka took Ryosei’s hand and entered the café. He braced himself for the moment he got pulled… but it never came.

“Welcome to Savor Soul! Are you two looking for a table of two?”

“Yes!”

“Very well then, right this way.”

The two were led to their table and the waitress left to let them decide on their order. Only when he had the menu in front of him did he realize what happened.

“Eh? I’m fine?”

“What are you talking about, Ryo-chan?”

“I was expecting someone to stop us from entering, so…”

“Huh? Why would anyone do that?”

“Well, you see…”

**…………**

“I was about to leave but… I wonder where Master went…?”

From the back of the store came Yutei Yukai, a gentle girl with long light brown hair arranged in a crown braid and purple eyes that matched her hair tie. She wore a white shirt under her pink hoodie and black pants. Her shift had just ended as an employee of Savor Soul but she wanted to give one last goodbye to the owner just before she left. She went out to search for a bit and decided to scan the floor just in case they were taking orders personally again. She learned from experience that her boss was a handful. She would pop in to help in whatever job was available depending on her whims. Her boss was a free spirit, so she thought that this was one of those times.

“…Eh?”

At that moment, her eyes landed on a very peculiar person. The sight of them made her peek out of the wall more but made a hasteful retreat when she realized they weren’t alone.

“Wha!? Eh? Wait, what…!? HUH!? W-W-Was that Ryosei-nii-san!?”

She spotted her savior from afar. She and Ryosei had a strange relationship, with her being the person he saved from a traffic accident seven years ago. He was also the person who gave her the courage to meet her sick mother again after she tried to distance herself from her. Anyone could see why she would be able to recognize him at first glance.

“B-But wait, it can’t be right…? His hair is different and he should be in another world finding Yukou-san at this point, so it can’t be…”

She spoke as if trying to convince herself but even her own body wouldn’t allow her any form of self-deceit when a small blue flame appeared right where the man she thought was Ryosei sat. Her mouth was left agape and screamed internally.

*“\*IT IS HIIIIIIIIIMMMM!!\*”*

She and Ryosei knew each other, but their relationship went beyond that of a normal one. Not to say that they were a couple, but because she had a strange connection with her said savior. She knew all about Ryosei. In the first place, she wouldn’t be at this point if she remained clueless about what he was. She saw him die right in front of her in the traffic accident seven years ago, after all. She knew that he was now a spirit who lived inside of Senkyo’s body. And, she knew that he was some kind of important person called an “Ambassador” after hearing the announcement that happened below the Konjou Clan’s castle. From what she knew, he should’ve been in another world searching for Senkyo, who had been taken by Yuu for some reason. Yet, the person in question was right in front of her chatting leisurely on the café floor.

The only reason she was able to be certain it was him was because of the blue flame that appeared in her eyes. Her connection with Ryosei was unique even compared to Senkyo. She was the only person who could touch him despite him being a spirit and she could also find out his exact location whenever she wished for it, marked in her eyes with a blue flame that ignored optical boundaries. Even with his hair and his look a bit different, the blue flame in her eyes never lied.

“He’s actually here… but why…?”

Curious, Yukai decided to walk to the back and switch locations. She headed for the closest corner to their table and peeked from there. After a quick scan to make sure that the customers on the floor couldn’t see her acting strangely, she strained her ears and focused on listening.

“—ahah. Wow, I knew you weren’t careful but that was common knowledge, Ryo-chan! No wonder they got mad at you.”

“Ugh, well now I know. It was an honest mistake but at least nothing major happened.”

Yukai’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“‘Ryo-chan,’ huh? Is that Chouka-chan…? She’s the only one who calls him like that… but when did her hair get longer? Hmm, they are spirits so maybe they can just make hair appear? …Wait a second—”

She quickly deduced the female speaker in less than a few seconds of eavesdropping. She met her before which helped, but the real contribution to her conclusion was the lasting memory she had of her first introduction.

*“\*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!\*”*

It was as vivid in her mind as if it happened just minutes ago. At that time, all she could do was let out incomprehensible confused noises while her mouth opened and closed like a goldfish. But her mind was racing a thousand miles an hour with thoughts going through her head like, “R-R-R-R-Ryo… RYO…-CHAN!? WHAT KIND OF CUTE NICKNAME IS THAT!?,” “What’s her relationship with Ryosei-nii-san!?,” “W-W-What do you mean recruited him!?,” “A Spirit Bond!? What’s that!?,” “A-A-A-A-A LEASH!? WHAT DOES A LEASH HAVE TO DO WITH ANYTHING!?”

It was clear why she had a breakdown with all of the incomprehensive thoughts running around, but to her credit, she was a completely normal girl until she became a victim of a dream demon, which only attacked her because she had a connection with Senkyo. She had no experience with other worlds, the supernatural, or anything fantastical before a month or so ago. The fact that she already adapted so quickly showed that she was stronger than she looked. She was faring better than anyone thought. But… she does tend to lose herself in some instances.

“—are they wearing matching clothes!? N-Now that I think about it, both of them have their hair dyed! In the same style too…! A-And those bags beside them…! Did they go shopping!? TOGETHER!? W-WAS IT A… A DATE—OWW!!”

After getting a solid smack on the head, Yukai was forced to turn behind her where she found the owner of the café standing with their arms folded. She had long reddish-brown hair flowing down her back and her brown eyes were staring at her like she had found a child making a mistake.

“Yukai-chan, your voice. People can hear you, you know?”

“A-Ah! Yes, Master, I’m sorry about that…! I wasn’t thinking…”

She made a swift bow, to which the owner could only sigh. She wasn’t mad to begin with so Yukai didn’t actually need to be so uptight around her. The owner knew she was a sweet girl but she could never get her to treat her like anything other than her boss. For now, she walked passed Yukai and took a peek at where she was looking a few seconds ago.

“Ah, wait!”

Yukai was forced to break her stance to try and stop her but mere words weren’t enough to block her path. She took a second to scan the area. Then, perhaps realizing which table she was spying on earlier, her eyes widened and a faint whisper exited her mouth. It was so low that Yukai was barely able to catch it.

“…It really is them…”

“…huh?”

The owner turned to Yukai.

“Yukai-chan, do you know those two? The one guy with the black and white hair and the girl with the green and purple one.”

“A-Ah, yes. I do…”

“How did you meet them?”

“H-How? Umm, I—uhh…”

She stammered at the sudden interrogation. She didn’t forget that Ryosei’s existence should be kept secret, so it was hard to catch any of the questions her boss was shooting at her. Preferably she would dodge the questions altogether, but the fact that she was curious about Ryosei made her reconsider feigning ignorance. It was like a sixth sense. After some time, her boss gave a firm nod and made a decision before she could even get an answer out.

“Hmm… Okay, go back to the staff room and change. That table is the last one you’ll do for the day. While you’re there, make sure to let them know: ‘Kaitlyn wants to talk with the both of you.’”

“Eh?”

A second passed. A few more followed for Yukai to fully process what Kaitlyn was trying to ask of her. Then, when it all clicked…

“EEEEEHHHHHH???”

**432 – Growing Spirit**

“Okay, enough about that. We shouldn’t even be talking about it in this place.”

“Really? I thought we were doing good talking vaguely.”

“Talking vaguely doesn’t work if you have spirits watching you who know what you’re talking about, Chouka.”

Ryosei’s story ended sometime after they finished giving their orders. The two of them were careful with their phrasing the whole time, making sure that no one would understand what it was without context. At first, Ryosei thought it wouldn’t be a great idea to talk inside the café but the more he arranged his ideas, he didn’t really have any reason to hide his identity from the spirits of Savor Soul. In fact, knowing more spirits could be a better move than staying away from them.

So, he decided to talk about it with Chouka to observe their reaction. He had no doubt that at least the soldier-cum-manager spirit he encountered last time was watching him. Sure, he changed his looks a bit but he didn’t believe that would be enough to deceive him. If Ryosei swapped positions with that spirit, then he wouldn’t have hesitated to drag him again into the Spirit Realm to interrogate. After all, he had a physical body now. He found it hard to believe that he wouldn’t bat an eye after seeing him last time. Yet, for some reason, he safely entered the café. Chouka said that it was probably him overthinking things. He didn’t know for certain whether he was right either, so the only thing that could confirm his suspicions now were the actions of others.

“Anyway, let’s talk about something else! We’re in a café, right? So let’s talk about some café-like topics!”

“‘Café-like topics…?’ Do you want to talk about coffee or something?”

“Coffee? What’s that?”

“Nevermind…”

The day had been so hectic that Ryosei almost forgot that Chouka was like a foreigner, or perhaps like a caveman who only knew some parts of the modern world through second-hand information. She never had any reason to explore Earth before she got her Empyrean Catalyst after all. When she brought up the term café-like topics she was probably expecting him to lead like he did whenever she had no clue what to do earlier that day.

“Then… how did you get permission to go here? Didn’t you say that you weren’t allowed to?”

“Ehhh… What kind of question is that? I said café-like topics!”

“They ARE café-like topics. I’m trying to know more about you. At least, I think that’s what people do in cafés. Of course, if you suddenly got the capacity to talk about coffee or sweets you’ve never tasted before then that’s fine too.”

Chouka puffed her cheeks and pointed a scowl at him.

“What’s with that condescending tone? You’re not even sure what people talk about here. Don’t get all high and mighty just because I don’t know what ‘coffee’ is supposed to be.”

“If you say so. Well, are we talking or not?”

“Fine. I’ll play your game!”

Ryosei didn’t exactly know what kind of fight Chouka thought they were in but that didn’t matter.

Apparently, after the last stunt she pulled, her mother grounded her for a week. Today was the day her ban was lifted, but she could only explore the outside under one condition: stay with Ryosei. His expression twisted when he heard of this. He knew that condition only meant trouble for him. But, either way, that was why he found her waiting in his abandoned vacation house. Since they knew that he went there every day, they were fine with leaving her there.

This made him ask how they were able to get in the first place. They were gods, but the barrier that surrounded the broken-down house was still made by his mother, the Clan’s most powerful Enchanter in history. To that, Chouka answered casually, saying that all they had to do was go to the Spirit World and walk in from there. It left him speechless for a few seconds but eventually understood why.

The barrier only affected Earth and the Earth-Spirit World which replicated what existed on Earth. Meanwhile, the Spirit World didn’t replicate anything. The same could be said for Zerid, as the barrier didn’t actually exist across other worlds. Then again, with the knowledge that the Invading God rewrote history for Earth and the Spirit Realm, it was also possible that the barrier was more powerful before but was just limited to Earth and the Earth-Spirit World because of this rewrite. Of course, Ryosei knew that this conjecture was just his pride trying to justify that his mother couldn’t have made something so flimsy.

“E-Excuse me. H-Here’s your order…”

“Oh, thank—eh? Y-Yukai-chan?”

“Whoa! It’s the person who can touch Ryo-chan!”

Standing in front of the two with their food was Yukai wearing a white long sleeve with a grey waist apron and black pants. She placed the food on their table as she replied.

“Y-Yes, I didn’t expect to see you two here.”

“Yeah, I thought your shift was already over since you weren’t here when we came in. But… wait, didn’t you work at the cash register?”

Ryosei still remembered the first time he saw her at work. She handled the cash register with ease and interacted with customers without problems despite her usually clumsy self.

“Y-Yes, I normally do… You see, our Master is a bit adventurous. Sometimes she asks us to do other jobs. Many quit because of it and the only ones left are already used to her whims, so this is nothing new to us. Well, she’s a good person overall so I don’t mind.”

“Is that so? Good work, then. You must have it hard.”

“No, it’s fine, really. But, more importantly, uhmm…”

Yukai turned to the corner of the wall where she saw Kaitlyn peeking and gave her a thumbs up. She had no idea how to respond to that, but surely that meant that she could stand to chat for a bit longer before she got to her main topic. After all, she did force her back to her work clothes to serve this one table. She was technically off the clock now and this was her time to spend.

“A-Are you two… o-o-on a date?”

“A date!?”

“Whoa! I know that word! Heheheh… ac—”

Chouka put on a smug face and crossed her arms, looking triumphant. Sensing something bad was about to happen, Ryosei quickly shut everything down by getting up from his seat and sealing Chouka’s mouth with his hand.

“—No. No, we’re not. I was just dragged around by Chouka for… uh, ‘spirit’ reasons.”

Chouka was giving Ryosei another piercing glare but she didn’t struggle, being careful of the food in front of them. Ryosei ignored it and tried his best to convey to Yukai the essence of their situation. Since she knew all about him being a spirit, something vague was a passable response. If she wanted more answers, then he could just give it later but that should have prevented her from asking any more questions about it… or so he thought.

“Really? It seems to me that you’re… really close, huh?”

“Eh?”

True, she didn’t probe any further about his purpose here but she unexpectedly tried to pry more about their relationship. The doubtful expression on Yukai’s face didn’t bode well for him. At that moment, Chouka pulled away Ryosei’s hand from her mouth and declared with a devilish smile. She gave one last look at Ryosei as if saying that it was payback.

“That’s right! Ryosei and I are partners! We spent the whole day together walking around town! We even got matching hairstyles and shopped for matching clothes! It was fun playing in the arcade the whole day and playing instruments in the school’s music room until late at night! Alone! With only the two of us!”

Her little stunt left Ryosei with his eyes wide and his mouth agape. This caught him under the heavy pressure of Yukai’s gaze. Not wanting to leave everything as it was, he tried one last resort to salvage what he could.

“—All. A-All of which is related to those reasons I told you before… so, uhm, I-I’ll explain later, okay?”

Yukai didn’t hide the dissatisfaction on her face and huffed at him, but she already prepared herself to leave. However, just before she did, she left the message her boss wanted to give them.

“By the way, Master wanted me to tell you two something. ‘Kaitlyn wants to talk with the both of you,’ she said.”

“Kaitlyn? Do you know someone like that, Ryo-chan?”

Ryosei’s head cooled down immediately after hearing what Yukai said. He could never forget his first encounter with the owner of Savor Soul. She walked into the room after he was already detained by the soldier-cum-manager spirit that caught him and was held in another building with guards around it. She was a person who had a system in place to manage both a business on Earth and in the Spirit Realm. He always wondered how she got it to work, and now, it seemed like he was about to find out in more detail.

“Yes… we met once.”

“Really? What’s she like?”

“Look, we can talk about that later.”

Ryosei turned to Yukai before Chouka began asking more questions.

“Okay, how do we meet her?”

“Master said to wait until after closing.”

“Okay, that’s fine with me. Though, I’ll need to leave for a bit. I had plans with someone later so I need to tell them things have changed.”

“Got it. I’ll make sure to tell her.”

After that, Yukai returned to the back of the store where she was met by Kaitlyn.

“You sure took a while, huh?”

“I-I’m sorry. But, this much should be fine, right? You were the one who brought me back on shift, Master.”

Kaitlyn’s eyes widened for a second before she answered with a light chuckle.

“Fufu, yes, I don’t mind at all. Although, it seems you’ve changed a bit, Yukai-chan.”

“I-I did?”

“Why, yes! You were always so uptight that I thought that maybe you hated the job.”

“H-Huh!? No, I don’t! I-I like it here! I’ve always been in your care, Master. You’ve done a lot for me, really. I’d never hate this job!”

“Fufu, ahhh… hearing that from you sure is reassuring. Thank you, Yukai-chan, I appreciate you working with me too. Well then, I don’t want to keep you any longer than I have to. You can go after telling me what they said.”

When she gave Yukai the green light, she looked away awkwardly before resolving herself to face Kaitlyn once again.

“Actually, Master, I have a request…”

**433 – Night and Day**

Under the veil of night, three figures walked up to the now-closed café of Savor Soul. Ryosei, Chouka, and Shin appeared without being seen by others. Ryosei would like to keep it that way too, so he hurried the other two before their bickering caught the attention of other people.

“Ka! For the last time, I’M his trustworthy partner!”

“Who are YOU even supposed to be!? You’re just some bird that Ryo-chan happened to see while passing by! I’m obviously more important!”

“Alright, alright, break it up you two! We’re already here, so get your act together and come in. Quitely. If you don’t, the owner will think I brought a bunch of kids to the restaurant.”

“Kaka, very well. Although, they won’t be wrong if they take even one look at that child over there.”

“Look who’s talking, Birdbrain! You were already told to stop speaking but you keep doing it.”

“I really don’t need this headache right now…”

Ryosei let out a wry smile as his eyes drifted away to the empty void above. He could only sigh to keep himself together. At first, he just wanted to let Shin know that he wouldn’t be going to the Warped Territories tonight but then, he insisted he wanted to come with them. Ryosei was expecting this much. Shin was a person who would jump at the first sight of something interesting. So, a change of schedule would definitely rouse his curiosity. He planned on agreeing in the first place but the real problem lay somewhere else.

When he introduced Shin and Chouka to each other, everything was fine at first. But then, the two began arguing the moment both of them claimed that they were his partner. At that moment, Ryosei realized his major blunder. He forgot to consider their overly proud personalities. They were both arrogant and self-important which made them clash for whoever had the right to call themselves his partner. It all looked stupid in his eyes, but nothing was worse than having both of them gang up on him because he said that aloud, so he kept that to himself. At the very least, none of them were egocentric, seeing as they still properly stayed silent when they were about to enter Savor Soul. Then again, it could’ve been some kind of petty battle to see who was more obedient, but as long as they kept silent, that was fine.

Ryosei pushed open the door and found only a single light open at the back of the store. Since no one made contact with them yet, he assumed that they were the ones who were supposed to go forward. Chouka shut the door behind them and threw a sneer at Shin, perhaps saying that she was the better partner for doing so. Shin only huffed and turned away his head sharply but it was clear that he thought the same thing. Ignoring the gestural battle happening behind him, Ryosei advanced toward the lightened path.

He opened a door to what seemed to be the staff room. There, the room had a homely atmosphere with the curved sofas that formed a half arc around a circular coffee table. There was a television in front of them, and additionally, more tables and chairs behind them that also had a good view of the television. The room had other forms of furniture and entertainment such as a bean bag chair, a billiard table, and a chess table. But, what stood out most over all of them was the bar that stood at the side. At this point, Ryosei couldn’t tell if the area he entered was a staff room, another store, or someone’s home, but he had no doubt that this was their destination.

“You’ve arrived.”

Just like it was outside, the bar was the only area that was lit in warm light while the rest of the room was shrouded in shadows. There, a woman with reddish-brown hair tied in a ponytail wearing a white long sleeve under a black vest, a black ribbon around her neck, and black trousers. She flashed her white canines at them when she saw their impressed faces.

“I’m Kaitlyn. The owner of Savor Soul, and the person who called both of you here. I see that there’s one more person than expected, but I don’t mind. Please, have a seat.”

The three walked up to the bar and sat on the bar stools.

“Do you three have anything you prefer? I serve a variety of drinks ranging in all ages. I wouldn’t be able to serve my underaged employees if I didn’t, after all.”

“Ka. Alcohol, huh? I do not mind, but you do realize that I am still a spirit, right? Unlike these two.”

“Why, yes. However, that doesn’t matter to me.”

Kaitlyn gave a mischievous smile before moving her hands expertly under the three’s scrutinizing gazes. She quickly produced four glasses of ice and poured two different bottles of liquid into each with sharp and precise movements. She ended her performance by placing a slice of orange inside each drink and served the drinks in front of each of them.

“It’s a summer classic from Italy called an Aperol Spritz. A non-alcoholic version, of course.”

The three could hear the bubbles dance on the rim of the glass as the zesty orange aroma spread through the room. Ryosei spent a few more seconds observing it while in contrast, Shin picked it up with no hesitation. When he lifted the glass from the bar, that was the moment when his eyes went wide. Ryosei was about to comment on this, but Chouka was first to point out a different subject.

“Hey, why are there four glasses?”

“Ah, yes. That’s for our fourth guest. You can come out now.”

“Y-Yes!”

A familiar voice entered their ears. Turning to the source, Ryosei found Yukai coming out of a door from the side. Her skin gleamed under the scarce warm light, making her blushed face a bit harder to notice. A purple cloth collar with a small bow adorned her neck. Her usually tied hair was let down, flowing freely and brushing her white dress. The one-piece dress had a ribbon by her left chest, purple edges, and a faint pleated skirt. Below, she wore purple loafers that matched her dress. She quickly averted her gaze before they made contact with Ryosei and began rubbing her arm. Ryosei guessed that she probably wasn’t used to having exposed shoulders, but he couldn’t deny that she looked good in them. A few seconds passed and Yukai found the courage to face the three sitting in front of the bar.

“I-I also! Want to listen!”

Though broken, her message was clear. Instead of avoiding, this time, she faced the three with resolute eyes, filled with conviction.

“Wow!! Yukai-chan, you look beautiful!”

“R-Really? Thank you…”

“Ka. A human, huh? I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“A-Ah, yes. Um, I-I’m Yutei Yukai, and… I’m… Ryosei-nii-san’s, uhm…”

Yukai looked over at Chouka and Shin. She felt that the wrong word would cost her one chance to get closer to Ryosei. So, for a second, she stayed silent and thought, searching for the correct answer. Then, feeling that her approach was wrong, she decided to take a deep breath and let her heart do all the talking.

“I’m… his assistant!”

Her response left a wider gap in Ryosei’s mouth and quickly turned to Kaitlyn.

“What’s the meaning of this…!?”

He said in a whispering tone to avoid grabbing everyone’s attention.

“Hm… I don’t know, really. All I had in mind was to fulfill one of my loyal employee’s requests. In fact, I accepted her plea wanting to know what she planned to do. I just let her borrow my wardrobe.”

Unsatisfied with Kaitlyn’s response, he pressed her further.

“Why are you letting innocent people in this meeting? This isn’t something that normal people should be a part of!”

“Normal people, huh? I had the same thought, but the more Yukai-chan talked to me, the more I was convinced she wasn’t one of those people. She tried her best to keep her words vague but I could see through it all. Then again, simply knowing who and what you are is enough proof that someone isn’t ‘normal,’ Konjou Ryosei. If you want to complain, then talk to her directly.”

Ryosei clicked his tongue and turned away. At this point, she didn’t seem like someone who could be convinced. Meanwhile, on the side, Yukai caught Ryosei’s troubled expression as he was being interrogated by Chouka and Shin. She ignored the two and made a beeline for him, figuring it was her fault that made him act like that.

“Ryosei-nii-san.”

Ryosei raised his head at the call of his name.

“Yukai-chan… what are you doing here? You know that you should be keeping away from danger.”

“Yes, I know. I know that you just want to keep me out of harm’s way but… But, I don’t want that. Ryosei-nii-san, I want to be here and help you. I couldn’t before, so this is my only chance. I don’t… I don’t want to be protected anymore. So, even if you don’t want it, I will always follow you.”

“Yukai-chan, don’t—”

“—I!”

Just as Ryosei was about to brush away her determined gaze, she took his hand with both of hers and declared.

“—I’m not letting go of you until we’re finished with this talk!”

Faced with her single-minded will to stay by his side and the piercing gaze that seemed to bind him from movement, Ryosei could feel something. An invisible force that prevented him from defying Yukai’s words. Even when he tried to struggle his hand with all his power, it stayed still in her grasp. He had a hunch on what was happening, and he knew he had no means of resistance.

“…You’re not letting go, huh?”

“Yes.”

There was such an enormous gap between her actions. In one moment, she was squirming and having a difficult time dealing with an awkward situation, stuttering, and sometimes even tripping on her words. But then, the next thing he knew, she possessed a will that was strong enough to control even his own. Ryosei couldn’t make heads or tails of what was happening and surrendered himself.

“Okay, fine. If you say so.”

She gave no words but the bright expression on her face and her deep nod were enough to deliver her message. Yukai quickly took the seat beside Ryosei and sat with a satisfied smile, still refusing to let go of Ryosei’s hand. Kaitlyn watched the event unfold with her brows raised. However, after seeing that they finally reached a conclusion, cleared her throat, and changed gears.

“Well then, on to the main topic…”

**434 – Kaitlyn’s Offer**

“First, I’d like all of us to be on the same page. Shin-san, how did the drink taste?”

“Ka… it was good. And that’s what’s unusual about it. I heard of spirits that could make food, but none of them could do it with physical ingredients.”

Yukai and Chouka didn’t seem to understand what he meant, so Kaitlyn elaborated.

“Yes, you’re right. The fact that you can drink it in the first place is strange. Unlike Ryosei-san and Chouka-san, you are a pure spirit. You can pretend to interact with objects but you don’t have the ability to touch or consume physical objects. Yet, you just did. The reason for that lies in my identity. Just like Ryosei-san and Chouka-san, I am a Di Manes.”

The ability to allow spirits to make contact with physical objects. This was one of the abilities given to the chosen ambassadors of the Spirit Realm. And here, Kaitlyn’s shocking revelation left everyone speechless. She did a quick overview of this when she noticed that Yukai was the only one who didn’t know about the Empyrean Catalysts of the Di Manes. Some were less surprised than others, such as Ryosei and Shin who expected the answer, but nonetheless craved an explanation.

Kaitlyn’s history could be traced right to when the previous generation of ambassadors ended and the next began. At the time, she had no clue of what had happened to the world. Since she was not present in Zerid at the time, her past before history was rewritten was unknown. Yet, she was the first person that was ever approached by a woman named Freda. At first, Kaitlyn was scared. She was suddenly approached by some otherworldly being, after all. Not many of the Spirit Realm’s residents knew of the other worlds at the time, so her experience was akin to someone encountering a ghost in a horror movie. She calmed down when Freda explained herself, but for some reason, the elf lady would never stop pestering her. She kept asking questions, probing what she wanted to do and what kind of person Kaitlyn was.

As time passed, Kaitlyn had enough and tried to leave town. That was when she first encountered the legendary Entity of the Spirit Realm. The Entity refused to let her out of town no matter what she did. When she demanded an explanation they only responded vaguely, leaving her with nothing to work with. About half a year after the two worlds were rewritten, Freda came up to Kaitlyn with a question.

*“\*If you had the opportunity, would you want to be a god?\*”*

It was an insane question. So many spirits aimed to become gods, but only so few actually reached it to the point where no one truly knew what it meant to become one. Nonetheless, Kaitlyn already knew her answer. The words came out instinctively.

*“\*Why would I do that? I don’t want anything that troublesome. I just… I just want to find what I’m missing…\*”*

That was the time when Freda offered her power to help find what she was missing. She explained to her all about the power of an Ambassador and what it meant to be one. At first, she thought to refuse. The trigger words “fulfill the will of the gods” were a huge red flag to her. But then, Freda followed this by saying that the gods imposed no will on the current ambassadors, letting them become free to wield their power however they wanted. A few days after, she officially took on the title, becoming the first ambassador of the new generation to have been blessed with their power.

At the present time, Ryosei, Chouka, and the other ambassadors were under the pressure of the Control Leader’s tight communication network. But, in Kaitlyn’s time, such a thing never existed. END’s title of “Leader” was yet to be coined. Thinking about it in hindsight, this was likely what Freda and the Entity wanted in the first place. Exposing the existence of an ambassador at the time would have resulted in the Invading God’s victory, but as long as they kept hidden, there would be nothing bad about it. In fact, it would be a boon to have an ambassador moving under the enemy’s radar, which is why they immediately set up a system to hide Kaitlyn’s existence before they could create a system that could detect her.

Where would one hide a leaf? A forest. And if there was no forest? Then, they would grow one. The Entity took this saying into practice by utilizing Kaitlyn’s ability and knowledge of the lost technologies of the previous timeline. Before, there was an economic system in the Spirit Realm besides the use of dark cores, and spirits had means to create food that had real flavor. The former was crafted by humans on Earth while the latter was discovered through the persistence, passion, and dedication of a certain spirit to create food. What the Entity did was replicate these discoveries by using dark cores as a substitute for currency and used Kaitlyn to let other spirits know what it felt to taste delicious food.

What prevented spirits from creating food with flavor was the absence of flavor. The spirits didn’t know what it meant to taste good food. If someone tasked another to imagine a new color, they would have no answers. To them, such a thing didn’t exist and it was the same for spirits. But, when Kaitlyn used her powers as an ambassador to let spirits taste food, then they would already have a reference to use and recreate what they experienced.

It was a slow and careful process, which involved the Entity making sure to erase their tracks so that neither END nor the Invading God would sniff their trail. Eventually, their efforts bore fruit when spirits from all over the Spirit Realm began producing food with flavor. An economy was fully manifested and completely threw END away from Kaitlyn’s existence. They investigated the origin of the flavored food and turned up with nothing. By that point, spirits that were able to make flavored food were too common to investigate. That was when Kaitlyn finally established Savor Soul. With the help of connections from both Earth and the Spirit Realm, she was able to make a café without arousing any suspicion of her identity.

Of course, since Kaitlyn had a physical identity on Earth, everything would be over the moment the enemy discovered that she was a spirit. This was why the area around Savor Soul was highly guarded by the Entity, making sure that no enemies would be able to manifest in the area, kicking them out before they could even see what was happening. Others argued that it would only rouse more suspicion, but the Entity was more than aware of this and made a practice of creating certain zones around the Spirit Realm where no one could enter without her permission. So, by the time Savor Soul appeared, it only looked like an establishment that was constructed in one of these zones. For reference, Ryosei and Chouka had first-hand experience in these zones when they used them to try to get back to The Garden.

“Earlier, my trusted manager reported to me something strange. You two.”

Kaitlyn said as she pointed to Ryosei and Chouka.

“A pair who could do the same thing I can: manifest a physical body. And one of them just happened to be someone who we encountered before. The strange spirit had a revenant status despite being clueless of the Spirit Realm. When I heard that, I knew exactly what was happening and did a quick background search on you… which leads me to my main question. What do you three think about working here?”

“What?”

Kaitlyn received another unanimous reaction of confusion from the four.

“The only reason you two are walking boldly out in the open in your Empyrean Catalysts is because there’s no longer a reason to hide our existence, right? Then I don’t see why you can’t help me with work here.”

“I still don’t get it… What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, for one, I genuinely would love to have people who can make more food for both humans and spirits. But, it could also be an opportunity for you two to learn something. That’s what we spirits are, after all. Especially us spirited souls. Lost in the dark, in hopes of finding something that we lack… Anyway, it’s just a little job offer that’s available for you all. It’s nothing more than that.”

With the clinking of ice against empty glass, Kaitlyn ended the conversation there. Shortly after, The three exited Savor Soul in contemplation. But, just before they left, they waited for Yukai to meet with them outside. She showed up in a white shirt with a pink hoodie and black pants. The dress she wore earlier was just borrowed from Kaitlyn and this was what she originally had on.

“Th-Thank you for waiting.”

“Well, now that everyone’s here, what are you going to do now, Ryo-chan?”

Ryosei stopped to think.

“Hmm, I guess we should get back to Senkyo’s house and deliver the stuff you bought earlier to The Garden.”

Earlier, on the way to inform Shin of their change of plans, they left their luggage in Senkyo’s house since it was the closest place they could drop them off. The house had been empty for about two weeks now since Senkyo’s disappearance, so he thought of tidying up at some point. But first, he thought to prioritize Chouka’s belongings.

“Huh?”

Yet, for some strange reason, Chouka let out a noise that suggested he said something unexpected.

“…Is there something wrong?”

Ryosei didn’t want to do it, but someone had to ask at some point.

“Well, yeah, I thought I was sleeping at your house for tonight.”

“E-EEHHHH!?”

Yukai was the first to respond with an alarmed scream. Ryosei couldn’t help but pinch the bridge of his nose. It reminded him of his stressed cousin back in the Konjou Clan.

“And, how exactly did you end up with that conclusion?”

“I mean, Mom said that I wasn’t allowed anywhere else besides where you are, and I wanted to sleep somewhere today so obviously I’d end up in your place.”

“What do you mean ‘obviously?’ You don’t even NEED to sleep! Just go home as a spirit!”

“But I WANT to sleep!”

He let out another sigh. Chouka wasn’t joking when she said that he would be able to feel tired again with his Empyrean Catalyst because he felt like an office worker enslaved in a black company. The mental and physical strain made him want to sleep too. Not wanting to argue anymore, he turned his head to Yukai.

“Yukai-chan, what about you?”

“Umm… I-I want to come too.”

Ryosei closed his eyes for a bit, turned to the night sky, and returned his gaze to Yukai.

“Can you do some of the housework while you’re there?”

“Yes! I’ll do them tomorrow!”

“Okay, fine.”

“HEY!! What’s with the difference in treatment!? You were completely against me sleeping over earlier!”

“Shut up, you cheeky brat. Unlike you, Yukai-chan isn’t high-maintenance. The only thing I expect from you is to make things messier over there. You do realize that it’s not actually my house, right? It’s someone else’s, you know! We’re just borrowing it!”

“HUUUUUH!? That’s rude! Hey, I can still do it if I try hard enough! Watch me!”

“The only thing I’m looking forward to watching is you fumbling while I sip a refreshing cup of morning coffee!”

“Oh, I’ll show you! I’ll make you eat your words and then I’ll be the one laughing at the end!”

“Ka… why do I feel like they forgot about me…?”

**435 – Night of the Hunt**

Ryosei, Chouka, Yukai, and Shin headed to Senkyo’s house. The group walked the way there except for Shin, who had to travel through the Spirit Realm to avoid getting spotted by other people. When they arrived, Ryosei casually placed his hand on the knob, turned the pins using spirit power, and opened the door. A normal person would have needed a key to open the door, but for those who knew how to use Poltergeist, it was only a matter of knowing the mechanics of the locks. Ryosei flipped the lights open and welcomed Chouka and Yukai. It was noticeably stuffy in the room, a sign that no one was living properly inside it. For now, he decided to leave a few windows open to let fresh air circulate. When they entered the living room, the bags Ryosei and Chouka shopped for were on the sofa.

“If you want to sleep, then I can show you to one of the open rooms… well, technically all of them are open but you get the point. There’s only one extra room so one of you can borrow Senkyo’s room or maybe his father’s room is fine too. I’m sure he doesn’t mind.”

“Oh no, I can just sleep in the living room. I don’t think I’m comfortable sleeping in someone else’s room…”

Yukai made her concerns clear, putting Ryosei in a position to tilt his head.

“I understand but…”

He turned to Chouka, asking with his gaze.

“Oh! Then I can sleep where Ryo-chan is sleeping!”

“Ehhh!?”

Yukai couldn’t believe her ears. It seemed like her mind was about to short-circuit for a second. Thankfully, Ryosei’s quick and decisive response saved her the mental resources to process Chouka’s words.

“I’m not sleeping.”

“What!? Why not!?”

“I don’t need to. Besides, I want to do something. You-cha—I mean, my cousin told me about a spirit smith that helps our clan. I want to meet them.”

“Come oooon! Can’t you just do that tomorrow?”

“No means no. Time is valuable. If you want to sleep, then fine, I won’t stop you. But, you’re not stopping me either.”

“Hnnghh…! Aaah, you’re no fun! Fine! Have it your way!”

Chouka huffed, grabbed her bags, turned to the stairs sharply, and stormed away. Ryosei and Yukai watched on, one unfazed while the other lost.

“Sorry, you had to see that, Yukai-chan. It’s not much of an excuse but I can’t let Chouka drag me around all the time. Are you really going to stay here, though?”

“A-Ah, yes… If you don’t mind.”

“Okay. I don’t want to make you feel like I’m dropping chores on you, but if you could keep Chouka company then that would be a great help.”

“That’s fine. I wanted to talk a bit more with Chouka-chan too.”

“That’s good. Well, I should be back before dawn. If I don’t get back by morning then you can ask Chouka to lock the door. Sometimes unexpected things happen in the Spirit Realm.”

“Got it. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Thanks. Well then, I’ll be going now.”

“Ah, t-take care!”

Ryosei headed for the front door and left the house. At the same time, he opened a rift to another world and crossed it. A gentle blue flame coated his whole body. Small bits of skin turned to ashes and flew with the wind, leaving a slightly paler version of his body with a few tiny flame-like edges. For the first time in a while, he released himself from the physical confines of his body and reverted to being a specter. When he made it to the street, the air trembled, and down came Shin from above.

“Ka. I take it you’re not finished for tonight?”

“Yeah, let’s go back to the Konjou Clan. My cousin knows where we need to go.”

“Very well. Shall we go, then?”

Shin raised his hand. Ryosei took it and locked their wrists. Shin’s black wings spread once more and the two took off into the sky. They headed to the nearby mountain where the Konjou Clan was located. No one could see where it was on Earth, but in the Earth-Spirit World, it stuck out like a sore thumb with how it was covered in a massive white barrier. Ryosei eyed it with the sound of the wind echoing in his ears. A thought came to mind.

“No matter how much I think about it, I really am a spirit now, huh?”

“Ka? What do you mean?”

“I just noticed a few differences between humans and us spirits. I didn’t think it would matter much to me since I didn’t lose my memories of being human when I became a spirited soul, but those Empyrean Catalysts are true to their job description.”

“Ka… I still don’t quite understand but good for you.”

Their travel to the mountain was quiet and smooth. It would have stayed that way too if it weren’t for a single unexpected factor.

“…!!!”

“Shin!?”

Shin suddenly let go of Ryosei and pulled his hand away. In between the small empty rift of their bodies was a long, sharp object that jetted across, causing a sharp cry of air that triggered Ryosei to immediately pick up on the situation.

“An attack!?”

Ryosei created a platform of solidified air to land on and searched for the assailant. He expected them to be hiding in the trees but noticed that he had bigger problems. Launching his way was a large uprooted tree. He sidestepped to avoid its trajectory. Then, a resounding boom made the air tremble followed by a man who pierced the sky and arrived by Ryosei’s side from the ground in a single second. Red skin came to light along with a large metal club. An oni. Specifically, the very same one who was a part of Black Rose.

“DIIIEEEE!!”

His savage battle cry blasted into his ears and felt a wave of weakness spreading through his body. He couldn’t dodge the attack completely, but it was better than receiving the full weight of his deadly force. Then, from the side came a shower of black feathers. Each one was stronger than they should have been and crashed into the oni and his club. But, stopping the oni’s crazed attack was impossible. None of them could even make him budge. What it did, though, was slow him down enough to give Ryosei enough time to erect a barrier.

Using a barrier created from spirit power was out of the question. Everything about the oni screamed that he was of higher spirit status than him. Just as Kosuke explained to him before, in a fight between spirits, spirit power was everything, and losing even a small portion was the difference between life and death. Making their spirit power clash was an absurd decision, so Ryosei opted to create one with magic instead. He knew of the dangers of using it in the Spirit Realm now, but it was a risk that he had to take nonetheless.

*\*VVVVRRRRSSSSSHHHHHHH!!!!!\**

The half-spherical barrier and the metal club made contact, creating a small spark that birthed a sea of black flame that blasted in every direction. Both the club and the barrier caught fire and it rapidly spread.

“COWARD!!”

The oni was forced to step back. Even so, he immediately recovered by slamming the metal club at his forearm. This action detached the part infested with black flame and recovered the metal club by consuming his own arm. Spirit that he was, losing limbs was something akin to losing a portion of armor. What mattered the most were their cores. So long as they stayed safe, there would be no casualties. The oni regained his weapon, shortly after, regenerated his forearm, and recovered his footing by also creating a platform of spirit power to face Ryosei once more.

Ryosei used the scarce amount of time he had to figure out what to do. Due to the oni’s high-pressured attack, the small amount of flame that was supposed to only appear at the contact point of his club and Ryosei’s barrier spread all over the sky and the embers slowly dropped to the trees below, having numerous trees catch on fire. At the rate it was going, it wouldn’t be strange if a forest fire occurred. But, it did manage to smoke out the person who threw the first attack at them earlier. Sensing the dangers of being one with the burning trees, a spirited soul wearing a navy blue gakuran joined the other three in the air by creating air footholds as Ryosei and the oni were doing. Just like the oni, he was a member of Black Rose.

“I told you to attack the tengu.”

“Who cares!! As long as we beat this kid into a pulp, nothing else matters!!”

“I told you, that’s not the plan. You have a bad match-up against his magic.”

“AND WHY SHOULD I LISTEN TO A TWIRP LIKE YOU!!?”

“The mountain is burning because of what you did. Please, not for me, for the land.”

The oni furrowed his brows and took a look below him where the young man pointed. The creases in his forehead deepened and his teeth grated. The oni growled as he matched the spirited soul’s stoic expression before deciding to concede.

“FINE!!!!!”

The oni left one last vicious roar before breaking his own platform after using it to launch himself at Shin who was observing the situation from afar. He did nothing but jump, yet that was all it took to shake the air with his explosive leap and reach Shin.

“Now. Prepare yourself.”

The young man shifted his gaze to Ryosei. He held a katana in hand, eyes as sharp as the blade, hand tightened like his stolid structure.

“I am Yukito Togiya. The person who will bring you down.”

**436 – Unstoppable Spirits**

*“\*Shin, what’s happening on your end?\*”*

*“\*Ka! So this is the Connect skill I’ve been hearing about. Too bad I have my hands a bit full with this brute to think about it…!\*”*

A streak of black ripped across the sky above them followed by a mass of red that leaped after it with speed just as baffling. Shin and the oni’s battle was much more fast-paced with how the oni kept constant pressure on Shin as he fled from the oni’s deadly reach. In contrast, Yukito kept the tip of his blade pointed at him. Knowing that ending their encounter early was the ideal outcome, Ryosei decided to initiate the offense. He manifested Kuro Yaiba and used a chain of flash strikes to close the distance between them.

When he got close enough, Yukito lunged forward and slashed at Ryosei. He ducked down, cleanly avoiding the strike, or at least he thought until he felt a powerful force shot into his leg, causing him to lose all balance. His eyes caught Yukito with a dagger held in his hand and moved to slash his neck. Lacking any other options, he used magic once more to create another barrier. The clash caused another spark of calamitous energy and slowly consumed the barrier and the dagger in its flames. The spark was mild compared to the oni’s first strike. But, Ryosei could not understand Yukito’s actions.

“How? How is that possible? You’re a spirited soul, aren’t you? Why do you have more than one weapon!?”

His body’s senses filled in any questions he had except for this one. Putting more distance between them, Ryosei glanced down to his leg where a spear was lodged into his shin. When it hit him, the sensation he felt was the same as whenever he took damage from a spirit’s attack. Spirit power clashing with spirit power. It was unmistakable.

What also couldn’t deceive him was that he saw Yukito using two weapons. Just like him, spirited souls only had the power to manifest a single weapon. And, whenever they did, their cores would be forcibly transferred into their weapons, making them literally fight with their life. Because of this, most spirited souls were passive while true spirits, who weren’t forced to endanger their cores, were more aggressive. Ryosei didn’t completely understand the concept behind it, but it was factual that spirited souls were limited to a single weapon. But then that didn’t explain Yukito’s katana, his dagger, and the spears that likely belonged to him as well.

Yukito didn’t respond with words, instead, with actions, he drew three kunai that appeared from under his wrist and rushed him. Ryosei blinked. When he reopened them, he found the numbers “21369/25000” in his vision. Before, he remembered Shin telling him that there was no possible way to accurately tell his own level of spirit power, but this phenomenon that he accidentally stumbled upon proved that wrong. What it also proved was that taking any form of damage from Yukito was detrimental.

In the past week, although Ryosei couldn’t successfully create a brand new spirit skill, his spirit powers rose from visiting the Warped Territories every night. The numbers he last saw them on were “23992/25000.” He used a bit of spirit power every now and then, but nothing so taxing that it took away approximately two thousand points of spirit power. From a single hit, a large chunk of his hard work popped away like a bubble.

Ryosei was still at revenant status. Although a spirit of his status could manifest into the world they were originally from, it was still below the minimal power of the true spirits who were birthed in the Spirit Realm. All true spirits were stronger than him by default. Yet, to save Senkyo, he fought those spirits and survived. Having a slight advantage in status was trivial to him. Which is why he knew for a fact that Yukito was no spirit.

Ghost. Eidolon. Revenant. Spirit. Seer. Visitant. Guardian. Sentinel. Demigod. God.

In order of the spirit statuses, Yukito’s status was at visitant at the very least. Ryosei fought against a seer that Shin called a land dragon before and it never placed this much pressure on him. Since Shin was also struggling with the oni, he figured they were at the same power level. A three-level difference in statuses was no joke, today he learned. For that reason, he prioritized avoiding getting so much as a touch from the young spirited soul.

Three balls of fire appeared beside Ryosei and launched to intercept the kunai. Yukito expected this much and followed with more kunai as he closed the distance between them. The exchange repeated producing a minefield of black flames in the air. While some of the clashes between the kunai and the fireballs only negated the other, most of them sparked calamitous energy. And Yukito was unfazed, weaving through it all. His actions were insane to the normal spirited soul. To any living being, even. No one would risk damaging their manifested weapon, and no one would willingly dive into an inferno of flames that would erase someone’s existence. But for Yukito, weapons were weapons, and he used every single one fully knowing that it would cause a spark of dark, deadly energy.

He eventually passed everything and slashed at Ryosei’s head. Ryosei almost responded instinctively to block with his blade, but it wasn’t a battle between humans. It was a battle between spirits, and a very disadvantageous one at that. Clashing weapons and shaking hands were no different so long as the attacker had full intent to bring harm. Blocking with Kuro Yaiba in spirit form was the same as offering his arm to be cut off, or worse yet, breaking his core and risking death.

*\*Krrt! Krrt! Vrrshh!! Vrrshh!! Vrrshh!! Krrt! Vrrshh!!\**

Blade collided with guard. Spirit power met with mana. Each clash that was lucky enough to go under the radar produced only a ring in the air while those that weren’t sacrificed both blade and shield to the gluttonous, black force. Yet, that didn’t stop Yukito from continuing his relentless attack and Ryosei from blocking every single one with magic and retreating. Ryosei used two barriers; one was to receive Yukito’s attack while the other was to ensure that no spark of calamitous energy would reach him. On the other hand, Yukito took on every single one, avoiding destruction by cutting off the portion of his body that was about to be hit by the sparks, using them as shields, and regenerating his body.

Yukito wielded the dagger on his left hand and the katana on his right. While dealing with these, Ryosei also had to be mindful of the spears that suddenly shot from the ground from time to time. Ryosei was completely on the defensive. He didn’t want to be on the back foot forever but he did notice something interesting. All attacks that came at him were in non-vital areas.

Yukito always aimed to cut his head off or his limbs. To a human, it could mean death, but for spirits, so long as their cores were safe, that was all that mattered to live. If Yukito wanted Ryosei dead, he would have aimed for Ryosei’s weapon, Kuro Yaiba, but he didn’t do that. In all likeliness, Yukito wanted something from Ryosei. Information, perhaps, or some kind of power that he held.

*“\*Shin, we need to get away somehow; we’re not beating these two!\*”*

*“\*Ka! I agree! This crazed oni must be at guardian status at least! I would try to get us out of here but this beast shows no openings. Do you happen to have any ideas? I don’t think I can last any longer!\*”*

Ryosei risked a glance above him and saw black clouds… or rather, a murder of crows that all flocked the oni while Shin circled around and tried to make distance. Then, a bright red light flashed from inside the black cloud of crows. A metal club came hurling toward Shin, which he barely dodged with the skin of his teeth. The air trembled as another explosion boomed from within the murder of crows.

Before anyone even realized what had happened, every crow was caught in a blazing red fire and the upper body of a massive giant of red-colored spirit power appeared from behind the oni. His signature savage battle cry shook the air once more and the metal club that passed Shin exploded, but instead of causing harm, the club exploded into red-colored spirit power that extended into the hands of the gigantic monster behind the oni, shaping an even larger club. A single powerful swing from the giant took every ounce of Shin’s power to dodge, and even then, the pressure of the swing was so intense that it made him lose control of his wings for a second.

It was so overwhelming that Ryosei could even feel it. He felt the time ticking away at the back of his head, screaming at him that he had to do something that very moment if he didn’t want to lose anything. Unlike Yukito, the oni didn’t show any signs of holding back to let Shin live. He was expending too much spirit power than he would have gained even if he killed Shin, showing that he didn’t care about anything else save for eliminating Shin.

*“\*I have an idea! But it’s going to be insane! It involves wiping out this entire side of the mountain! Do you have any objections, Shin!?\*”*

*“\*Ka! Do it! Anything will be fine just do it!\*”*

*“\*Then do your best to get to my side if you don’t want to die!\*”*

Shin immediately blasted his wings and changed his trajectory to Ryosei, all the while weaving past the giant’s gargantuan swings. Meanwhile, Ryosei finally decided to break his stalemate with Yukito. He released Kuro Yaiba, taking away his blade and returning his core to his body. Yukito furrowed his brow at his action and immediately used both his katana and dagger to sever both his arms. When he did, the pieces of spirit power exploded and reformed into numerous blades and his body repaired his lost limbs and weaponry.

In under a single second, he promptly committed to an all-out attack. A hail of blades came from all sides, breaking barrier after barrier that Ryosei set up. At some point, Ryosei was forced to create a spherical barrier to protect all possible attack angles. Yukito’s slashes and pierces became quicker and the number of spears that launched from below him increased three-fold. Under this extreme pressure, Ryosei was forced to erect more barriers. Every second that passed meant that one was broken down. The fact that Yukito decided to pour all of his power at this moment meant that he felt like he wouldn’t have any other chance to do so. That assumption was correct and it was painfully correct. Had he not done so, Ryosei would have already prepared his plans to end everything. But now, the pressure was on him to maintain defenses while constructing their offensive.

*“\*Ryosei, are you alright!? You’re surrounded in a ball of calamitous energy!\*”*

Of course, this was the natural result of Yukito’s attack. Ebony flame consumed Ryosei’s vision. The same should have been true with Yukito, but his attacks never stopped. He wanted answers but he had more important matters to deal with. The only thing keeping the deadly flames at bay was his barriers. Even then, they were not reliable. With Yukito’s attacks and the calamitous flames eating away at his defenses, every barrier lived for about one second and he couldn’t place a barrier too close to the other one lest he wanted it to be infected instantly by the preceding barriers that were already being eaten by darkness. This resulted in the space he had to shrink at the second.

“Damn it!”

**437 – Broken Blade**

*“\*Shin, change of plans! Escape by yourself!\*”*

*“\*But—\*”*

*“\*I have no time to argue! Do it now if you still want to live! We can’t get out of this together and I can’t escape! So, I’ll hold them back! Get out. NOW!!\*”*

Ryosei severed his Connect network with Shin and shut away possible responses. He made his decision at a single realization. He was trapped. He knew Yukito wanted him alive. At first glance, his all-out attack doomed him to die in his own barrier. But, there was a single way to escape that was still available to him. If he manifested back to Earth, then he would still live. That was what the enemy wanted, and frankly, Ryosei had no choice but to take it.

If he was at visitant status and a true spirit like Shin, then he could flee to two possible places: Earth, or the Spirit World. Zerid existed and so did its Spirit Realm counterpart, the Zerid-Spirit World, but he couldn’t enter it without crossing the correct sequence. Like a triangle, the three worlds were connected at the tips, but with the Spirit Realm’s existence, two more sub-worlds appeared between the Spirit World and the two other worlds. Meaning, that crossing through the Spirit Realm usually took more steps with no shortcuts.

As for Ryosei’s options, him being a revenant and a spirited soul, he could only move between two worlds: Earth and the Earth-Spirit World. Spirited souls normally didn’t have the ability to visit the Spirit World no matter what their status was. But, if they were invited there by a true spirit, then all would be fine. Enny said that she would allow Ryosei the ability to visit the Spirit World, but he still needed to become a visitant for that to be possible.

Taking all of these factors into account, as the revenant that he was, he could only flee to his homeworld: Earth. And if he did so, he was expecting to be greeted with some kind of reception by the enemy and secure him from there. Yukito cornered him completely.

“I wonder… what would he have done if he was here…?”

The image of his friend came to mind. Before, Ryosei was allowed to focus all his energy on fighting while Senkyo, the owner of the body he possessed, talked to him in his mind and handled strategies. It was the perfect synergy that got them out of almost every scenario. He couldn’t help but feel nostalgic in the face of certain defeat. He couldn’t imagine what the people who attacked him wanted him for, but he could imagine it wasn’t anything pleasant.

Right when he thought he accepted his doom, a black distortion appeared him front of his eyes and took hold of him.

“KA! YOU DIDN’T LET ME FINISH—I AM NOT LEAVING!!”

It was Shin with his legs and wings burning in calamitous energy.

“W-What are you—”

In the blink of an eye, the world of black flames around him disappeared, saw the calm veil of the Spirit World’s ephemeral atmosphere, and then his vision flashed once more to see that they were falling from the sky into a lake, the world around them covered in light blue particles, until finally, they crashed into the water. The light blue particles were now gone, leaving only the light of the two moons above to illuminate their surroundings. When Ryosei swam back to land with Shin’s body in tow, a quick scan of the area made him conclude that they were in Zerid. The mysterious plants, the two moons, and the strange nocturnal wildlife allowed him to tell immediately.

Looking down at Shin, his body had his wings and legs severed. Since they were caught in calamitous energy, he had no choice but to do so to live. He sighed in relief, knowing that his life wasn’t in any danger. He glanced at the center of the lake where they first fell and saw the wings and legs that he severed. They all continued burning and even spread over the water. It didn’t matter what the calamitous flames touched. So long as they existed, the flames would burn them until time dictated otherwise. It was truly a horrifying power, which is why he couldn’t even begin to comprehend what Yukito did to corner him and what Shin did to save him.

“You’re crazy… You know that, right?”

“Ka… kakaka…! It was certainly a thrill…”

His weary voice hid no lies. It seemed like even Shin thought it was insane, yet he tried to save him either way. Ryosei picked up Shin’s body and carried him on his back before hurrying away.

“We need to go. We’re still too close to them so we need to get away as far as we can before they realize we’re here.”

“…Agreed.”

Ryosei thought back to that single moment. What Shin did was save him by crossing worlds. Since he was trapped inside a ball of deadly flames, he opted to go around that barrier by flying to his location on Earth. It was the same thing Chouka did to cross his mother’s barrier with ease. With the ability to cross worlds, they could just travel on the other one if there was an obstacle on the current one. So, he flew through Earth’s airspace and returned back to the Earth-Spirit World where Ryosei was and picked him up when he saw using Glimpse that he was inside his barriers. Since Shin was going fast, he didn’t have enough time to properly time to completely avoid the calamitous flames, but he successfully picked up Ryosei and traveled through the Spirit Realm and into Zerid to escape. It was a great risk, but it ended up paying off.

“I didn’t think they’d still be after me…”

Ryosei said to himself absentmindedly.

“Ka. That was unexpected for me too. Who knew that Black Rose’s top would come for you directly?”

“Black Rose’s top? You know who they were?”

“Ka. The oni from earlier was Yamagami Enju while the young spirited soul you fought was Togiya Yukito. They were personally scouted by the leader of Black Rose and hold authority second only to the boss, Hiroto.”

A moment of silence filled the air.

“How do you know that?”

“Ka… yes, now that I think about it, I never informed you. The tribe that I belong to, the Umbra Squall, is a tribe that works under Black Rose. I am technically a member of their group… hmm, I do wonder how that will fare after they saw me assist you. Ka. Well, that doesn’t matter.”

Ryosei peeked over his shoulder to face Shin but held his breath after realizing that he had no idea how to respond to that statement. Speechless, he was. Who would have thought that a member of the enemy organization that was after him be the one helping him move around in the Spirit Realm? He suspected Shin of being a spy for a moment but quickly disregarded the idea. For one, Black Rose tried to kill him with all their might and he even disrupted their plans to trap him. If this was a roundabout attempt to gain his trust then he would start to think that Black Rose was a joke of an organization. And secondly, even if he was, he could deal with it later. The only outcome worse than Shin betraying him was Shin becoming extremely obnoxious to try and convince Ryosei otherwise.

“Wait, then why are you even helping me in the first place?”

“Ka. Because I want to, that is all. The tribe I belong to has a suffocating environment so I’m often away. You can say that I’m a ghost member… I think that’s what they call it. I’m a part of the organization by name only and I never show up.”

“So you ran away from home?”

“Ka! What a terrible way to put it. I prefer calling it becoming independent. Being inside the tribe is monotonous. Exploring the outside world is a better experience.”

“Huh, so spirits have those problems too…”

Silence befell them, leaving only the sound of nature. Then, in the middle of it all, a black distortion appeared in front of them. Thinking they were found by the enemy, Ryosei instinctively manifested Kuro Yaiba and entered a fighting stance. But then, when the person in front of them fully shaped themselves, Ryosei felt a wave of relief.

“Oh… it’s just you.”

“My~! Why sound so disappointed? You do know that I’m still a god of death, right, Young Prince?”

In front of them was Shigo, a god of death and former Di Manes of the previous generation.

“No, it’s nothing. More importantly, why are you here, Shigo-san?”

“Oh. Well, you see, this is actually an emergency so please come with me and ask questions later. It involves the matter you discussed with Mei.”

**438 – Alone, She Ponders**

“There… that should do it.”

Yukai nodded to herself after closing the windows. She checked the entire first floor and made sure that the doors and windows were all properly locked. She was currently inside Senkyo’s residence after telling Ryosei that she wanted to come with him when they left Savor Soul.

“I wonder where Yukou-san keeps his cleaning supplies… Wait, should I be searching through another person’s cupboards? W-Well, Ryosei-nii-san said he wanted me to clean tomorrow so it should be fine… I hope.”

With a hint of unease after every cabinet she opened, Yukai searched the house until she stumbled upon the materials she needed and planned out her objectives for the morning. While she was thinking of this, a thought came to mind.

“Oh, I should also make breakfast… ah, wait, spirits don’t need food, do they? Hmm… but apparently Master said that Ryosei-nii-san and Chouka-chan are different. Something about an… E-Empy… rean? Catalyst? A-Anyway, they seemed to like the food they ordered back in the café so I should just get something ready. Ryosei-nii-san isn’t planning on sleeping so he should at least get a good breakfast.”

Yukai went to the kitchen and scanned the fridge. She planned on getting a meal that was high in fiber and calcium for Ryosei but after seeing how some of the items inside the fridge were about to go bad, she prioritized figuring out a meal that would use them first. She searched the cupboards and the drawers once more to confirm that she had everything she needed for tomorrow and switched off the lights with a firm plan in mind. Heading upstairs, Yukai looked for where Chouka was, calling for her. It didn’t take long for a door to open and call back to her.

“Yukai-chan, over here!”

Chouka shouted down the hall and waved for her to come over. Yukai saw her head peeking from the open door and approached her.

“So this is where you were… um, are you alright?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Chouka cocked her head quizzically at Yukai’s sudden show of concern.

“…It’s just that you seemed upset when Ryosei-nii-san didn’t listen to you so…”

“Hmph! I don’t care about Ryo-chan anymore!”

Yukai couldn’t help but give a wry smile at the discrepancy between her words and actions. Though, she knew better than to voice them out now.

“More importantly, come in! I want to show you something!”

“W-Whoa, Chouka-chan!?”

Chouka took Yukai’s arm and pulled her in, shutting the door behind her with a loud bang. The first thing that greeted her were three sets of clothes lined up on the bed. They were all sleepwear with different designs. One was a normal set of pajamas, the next was a combination of a camisole and shorts, and the last was a nightgown.

“What do you think I should wear?”

“E-Eh?”

“Which one of these suits me best?”

“Wait, um, give me time to think for a bit…”

“Okay!”

Getting a taste of Chouka’s dizzying pace and seemingly bottomless energy, Yukai took a second to reset her brain. After fully processing what was happening, she shot a question at Chouka.

“Have you tried any of them on yet?”

“Yeah! When I went shopping with Ryo-chan earlier.”

“O-Oh, so you two did go shopping…”

Yukai whispered under her breath.

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“Ah, n-no, nothing.”

Focusing on the task at hand, Yukai tried to bury her unconscious mutter with another question.

“Then, what do you think is the most comfortable?”

“I think the first one is great! It’s soft and fluffy and it wraps around my whole body! I’ve never worn anything like it before!”

She pointed at the normal set of pajamas. Although they might be common to the average person, Chouka was a spirit. Yukai didn’t know all the details, but from what she understood earlier in their conversation at Savor Soul, this was Chouka’s first time inside a physical body. Looking over at her selection, the normal set of pajamas was the most different from what Chouka usually wore. Or for Yukai’s reference, what she saw her wearing before, which was a white dress.

“Then, how about wearing that one?”

Chouka furrowed her brows and tilted her head, uncertainty clear in her expression.

“Errm, well, it feels good but does it look the best on me?”

“I think all of them look good on you, Chouka-chan. You’re cute so anything works.”

“Ehehe, really? You think so?”

With a single answer, Yukai reversed Chouka’s outlook on the matter and a smile spread on her face.

“Yes, so you should just think about what feels best. It’s better that way.”

“Well, if you say so. I knew I could count on you, Yukai-chan!”

Yukai watched over Chouka silently as she tidied the other clothes and left only the pajamas out. She thought to herself, observing Chouka’s movements, her dyed hair, and her clothes, then turning to the shopping bags that she collected in the corner of the room, and then scanning the entire room. Something began echoing in her heart. It started off as nothing more than a small voice, but now it was giving her tension. Unable to quell it, ultimately, she ended up asking Chouka a question.

“…Hey, Chouka-chan, what do you think of Ryosei-nii-san?”

“Huh? That guy? He—”

With a sharp turn at the sound of Ryosei’s name, Chouka had all intent on gushing out all of her complaints and griping about the fact that Ryosei left them alone to do something else. But, when she saw Yukai’s expression, when she saw how her gaze bore through her as if trying to dig out her inner thoughts, she immediately changed paces. Yukai was serious, so she had to respond in kind.

“Ryo-chan… huh?”

She crossed her arms and placed herself on the bed behind her. Her eyes stared off into space as she probed herself for an answer. Then, when she locked gazes with Yukai once more, she responded.

“He… To me, he’s like a younger brother.”

“A younger brother?”

Chouka nodded.

“You see, I had a younger brother that I was really close to. His name is Masayoshi, and, well, Ryo-chan reminds me of him.”

“Are they alike?”

“Yes, they are but they’re different at the same time… You know, when I first met Ryosei, he was debating whether or not to sacrifice me to get some information.”

“What!? R-Ryosei-nii-san was!?”

Yukai couldn’t help but be shocked. After all, she never saw him as the kind of person who would endanger others.

“Hehe, yeah he was. But you know what’s funny, is that he ended up saving me anyway. All of that thinking just to leave everything to emotions… it was so meaningless that it was cute. At that moment, I might have seen a piece of Masayoshi inside of him.”

Chouka went on about how she later discovered that Ryosei’s weapon was the same one that used Masayoshi to create it. A pseudo-divine weapon made from the hands of mortals. She was shocked, but at the same time, she accepted it so easily that it felt like she was expecting it. In the end, Chouka had no idea if she felt that way about Ryosei because of how he acted or because he was the person who wielded his brother’s soul. The only thing she was certain about was that Ryosei was now her partner and her fellow Di Manes. It felt natural to be around him, so she did exactly as her heart told her to.

“Is that so…”

Yukai took her words and pondered over them. The air between the two became awkward and Yukai used the bath as an excuse to leave. She searched the halls a bit to find the bathroom. When she did, she became unsure of what to do since she was in another person’s home. Knowing that she invited herself into the house there wasn’t much of a reason to worry about manners now that it was this late. So, she decided to use the bath and clean everything she used later before she left.

After giving her body a good cleanse and thinking over her thoughts in the bath, she wore the same loungewear she had earlier and returned to Chouka’s room where she found her sleeping snuggly in the bed.

“She must have been really tired…”

Chouka was wearing the pajamas that Yukai suggested to her and had her body sprawled over the bed. She didn’t remember seeing Chouka take a bath but since she had her hair dyed, she probably needed to avoid them anyway so she refrained from waking her. Yukai thought of leaving but realized that she didn’t have the confidence to commandeer another room in the house for herself. Instead, she searched the room and found a futon in one of the closets and spread it out on the floor, doing so as quietly as possible to avoid waking Chouka.

When everything was all set and done, she turned off the lights and tucked herself in. With nothing but the darkness in her eyes, she stared off at the ceiling in deep thought. The wind blew against the windows and made them rattle and weep. At that moment, Yukai’s trance was broken by a sharp yelp that came from above the bed. Turning her head to it, she called.

“Chouka-chan? Is there something wrong?”

For a time, the room became silent, deafeningly so.

“Chouka-chan?”

That was when Yukai decided to get up and check on her. But, when she tried to rise, her body refused to listen to her. Then, a whisper entered her ears.

“Oh, don’t worry about her.”

A voice she never heard before sent a chill down her spine. Her eyes shot to the side where she saw a corpse staring her down from above. She let out a scream and tried to shoot backward, but again, her body failed to follow her orders. From above the corpse was a young woman whose voice rang softly without a hint of panic, like a flower growing around the mud, her beauty was complimented by the juxtaposing presence of the corpse. Yet she emitted an uncanny aura for being the only flower to bloom, or in this situation, the only person to be able to move and do as she pleased.

“We’re just here to pick her up. I’m Yin, by the way, and he’s Yang. Nice to meet you, uhmm…”

“Gurghrh rgeerh!”

“Oh, that’s right. Yutei Yukai-san. Thanks, Yang.”

“Grugh!”

**439 – I Will Change**

I am not a good girl.

“Now, let’s see what we have here…”

Even now. Even at this time, when I’m left with nothing but confusion, this is the one fact that I will always be certain of.

“Hello there, Chouka. You got me good last time. I didn’t expect someone who can use mental arts like you would pop out of nowhere. Think of this as my payback.”

The people in front of me aren’t human. The strange girl walked away from me and approached Chouka-chan while the corpse-like being kept staring at me with some kind of terrible breath coming from its mouth. I can’t smell anything weird, but the air coming from it was as thick as fog. From what I can tell, they’re spirits but I don’t know much to begin with, so take what I say with a grain of salt. This is how I am. Always left out of the circle because of how pathetic I am. Whatever I do I make mistakes and I often fumble trying to fix them. I’m a helpless girl. A burden that no one wants.

I am not a good girl.

Others say that I’m cute or nice, some even say innocent or pure. But, I beg to differ… because… I know the truth. All of that is just a front I put up for everyone. In reality, I’m not that innocent girl that everyone makes me out to be. I’m a horrible child who once abandoned the mother who raised her just to save herself from suffering. I only think for myself, but I’m too cowardly to let that show and end up failing to express myself. I learned that and used it to my advantage. If everyone kept treating me like a good girl, then no one would hate me. A sound reasoning, I thought, but in the end, I could never truly escape hate. The more I kept living my life with this unintentional act, the more I saw myself as a pest. No one hated me more than I did.

Yutei Yukai is a bad girl whose heart is tainted by her own selfishness and self-hate. In class, I could never reject anyone’s help. Everyone liked me for this, but that was just because I didn’t want anyone to hate me. Deep inside, I felt tired of how I kept saying “yes” and “sorry.” Even on that fateful day when I became more involved with Yukou-san, I hated how he couldn’t just leave me to handle the class notebooks. It was my way of being concerned for him. Why couldn’t he just accept it? Then, when he snapped, I retreated to my shell and cried my way out of trouble.

The next day, we ended up giving each other cookies. I was a little annoyed at first, but then thought it was a bit funny. The thought of fighting with a friend came to mind, but we weren’t like that. We were just classmates. Then, when he was being ostracized by the class for a misunderstanding, I thought it was a great chance to finally make friends with him. With him being down, maybe a bit of talking is all that I’ll need to do. Maybe… with a bit of talking… I could find something that could fully distract me from my dying mother… That was what I thought at the time.

Then, it happened. My unexpected reunion with the person who saved my life back when I was a child.

*“\*That’s you, isn’t it!? Konjou Ryosei-onii-san!\*”*

*“\*Yeah…. It’s me. Nice to meet you again, Yutei Yukai-chan.\*”*

He saved me so many times. Even after he died when he saved me the first time, he saved me again and again after that. He was like a bright burning light in my life. My poison. The person who would one day erase the dark stain that was me. One day, his overwhelming brightness would eradicate me from this world, and I was fine with that, so I desperately tried to help him.

I didn’t realize it at that time, but I had already given up on myself, and on my life. Demons? Evil spirits? I didn’t care if I had to face them again to help Ryosei-nii-san. If I died trying to help him, then so be it. I could tell that he wanted me to keep living and cared for me more than I did, but even so, I wanted nothing more than to simply be of help to him. Just like how he saved my life, I wanted to do something for him. Something… anything… if I didn’t, then I would probably lose it completely. That’s what I felt. So selfish, I know, but that’s all I knew how to do. Even if I was blind to it. Even if I was unintentionally ignoring it, I was still wrong.

There was only one time I was able to let the darkness in my heart completely loose.

That time, was another time when Ryosei-nii-san saved me. He shared the darkness in his own soul with me. He shared his own tragedy. He shared his humanity with me. Then, for a moment, for a brief moment, I thought, “I want to change.”

I was blind to it the entire time, but that was probably what my heart yearned for the most my entire life. What Ryosei-nii-san did was make me aware of that. I am not a good girl. I act all nice and innocent, but the real me is dark and evil. Even so, I want to change. I want to become good for once. Even if I know the truth, even if everyone knows the truth, I just want to try and live my ideal. For the first time in a long time, I wanted to live.

That must have been why… even when I found out the truth about my father, I was still able to keep moving forward. Ryosei-nii-san was right about what he said. He hit the mark, really. If I found out that he was a Hero who was appointed by the gods earlier, I would have probably broken. It wasn’t hard to imagine what would have happened to me alone. But, I’m not alone anymore. With Ryosei-nii-san by my side… there’s nothing to fear. Right now, he’s somewhere else, but that isn’t an excuse for me to be weak. If I can’t handle problems on my own, then I’ll only become a burden for him.

“…Don’t… touch her…”

I struggle to speak. I don’t know what I can do. Would my meaningless words sway this strange girl into stopping herself? I highly doubt it. But still, I can’t let Chouka-chan get taken away! Not under my watch! Not without putting my life on the line!

“…Don’t… take her away…”

Even if my words are lies. Even when the thought of letting Chouka-chan get taken away and disappear flashed through my mind, I quickly brushed it away. Why do I feel this way towards her? I’ve done a lot of thinking, but I was probably right the first time I saw her. I’m jealous of her. I envy her from the bottom of my heart. Whenever I see Chouka-chan, I see a pure and innocent girl, nice and cute, loved by all. She is who everyone mistook me to be. She is my ideal, and seeing her move around and interact with the people in my life honestly hurts me. If I were like her, I could have had this kind of relationship with everyone else.

But, I am not. I am Yutei Yukai, and I’m not a good girl. I am not Chouka-chan. Just like Ryosei-nii-san, I want to face my problems and my impurities with my own power. Even if my heart feels one way, I will make the decision I want to. If I don’t conquer myself now then nothing will change!

“Oh, and what are you going to do about it?”

The strange girl turned to me and sneered. She knew that I was nothing but a helpless human. She, the corpse beside me, and Chouka were supernatural beings completely beyond my reach. And the two of them were overwhelming Chouka. What could a bystander like me do? Self-destruct at best. But, even so, even so…! I—

“—I WILL PROTECT CHOUKA-CHAN…!! EVEN IF IT COSTS ME MY LIFE!!! SO…! GET AWAY FROM HER!!!!”

*“\*Analyzing Identity… Yutei Yukai: confirmed. Order: acknowledged. Execution… COMMENCE!!\*”*

*“\*Eh…?\*”*

At that moment, the voice of a man I didn’t know echoed in my head. His speech was so patterned and systematic that I couldn’t help but make out an image of a man wearing glasses, fixing them with two fingers as he declared his final words. A bright white light enveloped my vision and I peered through it with the help of my hand blocking out the light. That was the moment I realized I was able to move. And, the next, I realized that the object illuminating everything with a blinding white flash was something very important to me, and also something that shouldn’t be here.

“That’s…! Mom’s necklace!”

Floating in front of me was an item I could never forget. This was something that I used to wear in the past as a gift from Mom, but I gave it back to her a few months before I decided to place her out of my mind. With tiny, cute silver chains that looked like they would break at even the simplest of mishandlings, there was a small white pearl that hung from it. Mom said that it was Father’s last gift to her. It was the Hero, Yutei Katashi’s last interaction with our family. And, it spoke to me.

*“\*Activating Release Factor.\*”*

**440 – Enai**

The blinding light fully enveloped Yukai’s body. It was a unique sensation that she had never felt before. Hot, but not searing. Like floating freely in the sky… or perhaps underwater with how a sudden weight became apparent to her. It wasn’t heavy but she felt it coil around her entire being. Both body and soul. She had no idea what was happening, but her instincts told her that she was free. One with her soul, she understood that there was no need to understand. She only needed to do as her heart told her to do.

*\*FFFFSSSSSHHHHHHH!!!!!\**

“What!?”

“GROERRU!!”

The sudden flash of light put both the spirits on high alert. The ghoul-like being called Yang immediately sprang into action, rushing to Yin’s side and dragging her away, spitting a wad of black tar where its instincts told him the danger was. Right where Chouka once was. Once everything cleared and their eyes adjusted to their surroundings, they found themselves inside a land of gold. The room that was once in Senkyo’s house was no longer there. Colossal mountains pierced through the thick clouds and revealed the clear blue sky. The silver lining of the clouds reached the earth, revealing the white feathers that spread across the air, and a girl that stood in the middle of all of it—an angel.

Clad in gold and silver plating, her light brown hair danced in the wind as the feathers did, her purple eyes pierced through the darkness with their deep hue fueled by resolve, her head adorned with gold and silver ornaments that took the shape of the same feathers that covered the two white wings that sprouted from her back. Spreading wide and free, Yutei Yukai stood strong in front of Chouka, gripping strongly on the tower shield that she held to repel Yang’s spit of black tar.

“She’s a Hero!? How!? I didn’t even sense the presence of a Divine Weapon nearby!”

“GRRRUGRAURR!!”

“I can’t help but complain! How did she even activate her Release Factor without offering her blood!? She shouldn’t have been able to move!!”

As the two shot words back and forth, Yukai had the expression of the person most awed by the sight she produced. Her mouth was left agape as she felt everything around her follow her will. Then, from behind her, she heard a voice.

“Y-Yukai-chan…”

“Chouka-chan! You can move now! W-What’s happening here?”

“T-That’s what I want to know! I—but I thought you weren’t an ambassador… why…?”

Both of them recalled the same day. When Freda brought them all beneath the Konjou Clan’s mountain castle, she announced to them the identities of the ambassadors of the current generation that were present at the time. Among those names, Yukai was not called, even after Akira Ren asked for a second time.

*“\*Allow me to explain.\*”*

“W-What!? W-Who’s there!?”

The same voice she heard earlier echoed in her mind. A man with a calm demeanor and an analytical tone. Her sudden outburst made Chouka jump back a bit.

“Y-Yukai-chan? Who are you talking to…?”

“T-There’s this voice I keep hearing in my head… and, uhmm…”

*“\*Please, calm down, Yutei Yukai. I am your ally, the soul that resides within your Divine Weapon.\*”*

“…O-Okay…?”

Yukai responded gingerly. It reminded her of the stories that Ryosei shared with her before about being a spirit that resided inside Senkyo’s body. Thinking she had no better choice, she decided to lend her ear. On the side, Chouka still didn’t know what was happening, but she believed what Yukai last said to her and decided to stay quiet and observe the movements of her potential kidnappers.

*“\*My name is Enai, a god who was embedded into this weapon—\*”*

“A-A god!?”

*“\*…Yes, now, please, do not interrupt me when I am speaking.\*”*

“Ah, o-oh, s-sorry about that.”

Yukai instinctively shot her eyes to the ground while Enai cleared his throat and continued.

“\*As I was saying, I know that you have lived a normal life up until recently. You have no idea what it means to have me and what you are capable of. Frankly speaking, this is an incredibly large disadvantage for us. But, that is fine. Other ambassadors of the past had the same experience. It is my job to see to it that your mission as an ambassador is fulfilled… or at least I would like to say, but unlike the other generations, the ambassadors of today have no mission given by the gods. So, I have decided to support your personal goals instead. As for your current goal, how do you wish to see it achieved?\*”

“M-My current goal? …I want to protect Chouka-chan.”

*“\*I know that already. What I want to know is your methodology. The Divine Weapon has had its Release Factor activated. This awakened my consciousness and has forcefully transported you, Chouka, Yin, and Yang into a stand-alone dimension that exists only through my power. It is located in no particular world, which means nothing can enter or exit without your consent. The dimension you built responds to your soul. In this one, all attacks that threaten your allies will always attract to your shield. A sanctuary. Knowing this, what result do you want for each person transported into your realm?\*”*

“…I want this to end with Chouka-chan unscathed and away from those two… and, um, as for them… I want to make them unable to fight once we return to the real world.”

*“\*Analysis: what do you mean by ‘unable to fight?’ Shall we kill them?\*”*

“NO!! D-Don’t kill them! Um, j-just make them tired… or something! Drain their energy so that they won’t be able to attack any of us! Anyway, just don’t kill them!”

*“\*Analysis: COMPLETE. Order: acknowledged. Requirement: sacrifice 20 percent of your energy. Do you accept?\*”*

“Sacrifice my energy? D-Does Ryosei-nii-san go through a similar process?”

*“\*Answer: no. Every ambassador has their own unique ability. Di Manes and Heroes are blessed differently. For Heroes like you, the power of the gods embedded in Divine Weapons adapts to the wielder’s soul. Our powers change depending on who we are bound to. Because of this, my power specializes in bringing results through self-sacrifice. Before, you said that you would protect Chouka even at the cost of your life. Was this a lie?\*”*

“…No. No, it’s not. I want to prove myself! Even if I have to offer my entire being… I will become someone worthy of standing by his side!!”

*“\*Then, do you accept the price?\*”*

“Yes!”

*“\*Requirement: fulfilled. Execution… COMMENCE!!\*”*

**441 – Those Who Answer Her Sacrifice**

At Enai’s words, the white angel wings behind Yukai flapped, releasing a mass of feathers into the air. Every single one gathered in one place, consuming the feathers that were present in their surroundings before, creating a ball of white light.

“She’s making her move!”

“Gruuurarghh. Rrraagrrrhh!!”

Yin and Yang responded immediately. A ginormous black ribbon appeared behind Yin and shot at the ball of light, surrounding it. Meanwhile, Yang rushed at the two and spat black shadows at them. Along with the tar-like projectiles expanded a gloomy fog, coming from Yang’s body. Meanwhile, the ribbon that surrounded the ball of light wrapped around it and sealed it. The moment Yang’s fog reached Yin’s location, a massive shadow towered from within, shaping a deformed woman bound in black ribbons riddled with nails and her body blanketed with burn marks and scratch wounds. The woman, with her single eye, directed her piercing gaze at the ball of light sealed by Yin’s ribbons. In that instant, a gigantic nail pierced through it.

“U-U-Umm, uhhh, I—I don’t think it worked!”

Yukai shouted in a panic after seeing her enemies’ terrifying display of power. She was currently under fire with Yang spitting an unending barrage of black shadows at them. Her enemy tried to shoot around her shield but just as Enai explained before, every attack was redirected to hit her shield. When Yang attempted to switch to melee combat, Chouka kept him at bay with her own power. Playing a certain tune with her flute, she made him lose balance or his sense of direction from time to time and followed it up with an attack that made the grass and the soil bind him before releasing a flutter of butterflies in his direction. Unfortunately, none of her binds could keep him still long enough for the butterflies to reach him.

*“\*Worry not. They no longer have the power to resist your influence.\*”*

“W-What is that supposed to mean?”

*“\*Being in this dimension allows me to analyze the enemies’ powers thoroughly. The undead woman appears to be an extension of that girl’s soul. Everything pierced by its nails loses all power, whether it be spirit power, mana, or any kind of energy like stamina or electricity. Its effectiveness seems to depend on the user, but theoretically, it could kill even a god with a single hit. For someone who requires energy to use her power, you were lucky we locked her into our playing field before she summoned that monster.\*”*

Hearing the possibilities through Enai’s mouth sent a chill down her spine.

“…Then, what do we do now?”

*“\*Apologies, I have yet to answer your previous question. By ‘influence,’ I meant the amount of energy you sacrificed. I, your Divine Weapon, can grant you power in exchange for that, and even more so in this dimension. The moment you gave a sacrifice, the battle had already been settled. There is nothing left for us to do but wait.\*”*

They turned their attention to the black ribbon spiked by a nail. Inside all of the chaos remained a ball of white light wherein a gleam of yellow brilliance was uncovered. It was only a single moment of weakness. The few milliseconds of blindness that it took for Yin and Yang to blink was all that was needed to catch them off their guard. Right when they thought their duo was successfully cornering Chouka and Yukai, taking control of the situation, a maw of white and azure blue devoured the upper body of the gigantic undead woman.

“Eh…”

“GRRAARR!!”

An echo of disbelief escaped Yin’s mouth while Yang growled and rushed back to Yin’s side the moment the danger was apparent to him. From within the black ribbon that now crumbled under pressure, revealed that the white ball of light produced a magnificent being. A long, serpent-like body slithered out with its white fur and azure markings. It had two legs with serrated claws that held up the front portion of its body while the back portion seemed to effortlessly float graciously in the air. Three pairs of wings, totaling six, spread from its back while its long neck prided a marvelous teal mane. A floating sapphire crown embellished with crystals trailed behind its head as it turned to Yin and Yang to place them under the pressure of its yellow eyes. As defined by the myths and legends of old—a dragon granted everyone its presence.

“Y-Yang—”

Yin finally snapped out of her trance. Alas, her action was too slow for the honored being above her. Before either Yin or Yang could move, an azure blade impaled each of their bodies from above, pinning them into the ground. They felt no pain, after all, they were spirits, but that didn’t mean anything when their spirit power refused to flow as it should, making them unable to escape their skewered state. As everything unfolded before them, Enai explained to Yukai what was happening.

*“\*Your sacrifice resonated with Qar, one of the Heavenly Lords. Beings that assimilated with the weapons of Ambassadors of the past. In other words, that dragon you see there is one of many creatures and items that have interacted and assimilated with the Divine Weapon that you hold now. With your power, it allowed them to manifest from your weapon.\*”*

“A-Are you saying that this shield can summon dragons on Earth!?”

*“\*Impossible. Though you managed to manifest them, they are all restricted to this dimension you are inside now. Having them manifest outside of a Divine Weapon’s jurisdiction is inconceivable.\*”*

“Oh, okay… I guess that’s good… but, what’s going to happen to those two now?”

“\*Qar has the power to give judgment upon those who threaten his domain and its people. When that Yin girl impaled Qar as he was manifesting, it saw her as a threat, and in accordance with your wishes, he replicated her power and rendered her and Yang immobile. Right now, he’s spreading his influence through their bodies so that they won’t be able to use their power even after you all return to the real world and this dimension collapses. Of course, this will only be temporary until his power completely fades away from them.\*”

“T-That’s fine! If we can just talk it out, then maybe…”

About half a minute had passed since Yin and Yang were impaled by Qar’s azure blades when Yukai began feeling something strange. According to Enai, that was the sensation of the dimension beginning to crumble. Any second now, and the golden land before them would disappear and they would return to their world. It didn’t take long for one of her blinks to become the transition between her Divine Weapon’s dimension and their current world. She looked around and confirmed that Chouka was still safe right beside her, meanwhile, on the ground in front of them were Yin and Yang crumpled to the ground.

Still in her angelic form, she told Chouka to stay and keep an eye on their movements while she slowly approached them. Doing exactly as Yukai instructed, Chouka held her flute near her mouth, at the ready in case anything suddenly happened. Yin and Yang stayed unmoving, perhaps exhausted from having the energy forcefully taken out of their bodies. She recalled Ryosei saying that spirits only existed because of spirit power, so seeing their bodies present suggested that they still had power in them, but Enai reassured her that it was silenced by Qar so it was okay for her to interact with them for the time being. With her release factor still active, the two wouldn’t be able to do anything against her or Chouka.

Yukai reached out her hand to try and wake Yin up but her hand went right through her body. It was then that she was reminded that her relationship with Ryosei was truly unique. Even now when he desired to make contact with Yin, she was unable to make contact. It was a stark contrast to the times when she interacted with Ryosei as if he were human. But, shaking their bodies seemed to be unneeded when the two began to groan and make small movements. An air of relief flowed through her lungs.

“Yukai-chan!!”

But, it was short-lived as numerous bodies appeared all around them from thin air.

**442 – The Truth He Hid**

“Right this way.”

Shigo, a god of death, urged Ryosei and Shin forward after crossing through a pitch-black portal he created. It didn’t take Ryosei long to realize where he brought them. It had been a while since his last visit, but he could never forget this place.

“K-Kaa! W-What is going on over there?”

The unease was clear in Shin’s voice. Before, Ryosei thought that other spirits hid themselves or perhaps simply didn’t like visiting this place to explain their lack of presence, but from Shin’s reaction, he considered that they were repelled by this place. Why? Because it felt like their very souls would rot the longer they stayed.

In a dark hospital room, Mei, Chouka’s mother and a god of life, stood near the bedside but far enough to avoid making contact with the patient confined in the room. Shigo walked up to the closest wall and gestured that they get closer to the bedside. Shin’s primal instincts froze him in place, but it was commendable that he didn’t flee on the spot. Meanwhile, Ryosei walked up to the bedside and asked.

“What happened?”

Ryosei arrived with the patient—Yutei Yuriko, Yukai’s mother—letting out strained grunts and breathing heavily under the influence of Mei’s healing light. Mei shifted her gaze from Yuriko and met Ryosei’s eyes.

“You’ve arrived. Come to my side. I must confirm something.”

“Alright.”

Ryosei quickly complied, leaving his questions for later. When he got to Mei, she placed her hand on his chest, and out came a flutter of butterflies from under her sleeve. He remained still as the creatures danced all over the surface of his body. When she was done, the butterflies gathered on Mei’s palm and disappeared into her body.

“It is just as I thought.”

“…”

Ryosei stayed silent, eyes searching for an explanation.

“Ryosei-san, it seems your request of me must be fulfilled this very moment.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“If we do not, Yutei Yuriko will die.”

“!!”

He was prepared to hear that very response given the state he saw her, but it was still hard to accept even when Mei had voiced it. Yukai’s mother would die. He dreaded to imagine what terrible events would happen in a future like that. Namely, he feared what would become of Yukai. Her mother’s survival was the only thing keeping her mental state stable. The time when he received the news of his parents’ deaths flashed through his head. If he let her mother die here, he was almost certain that Yukai would trek down a dark path just like he did. He needed to prevent this at all costs.

“What do we need to do!?”

“Calm yourself and listen. Unfortunately, there is a strong curse plaguing this woman. Currently, even a god of life like me or a god of death like Shigo cannot do anything to prevent that. After all, this was a curse given directly from a true god.”

“A true god… do you mean gods like Hades?”

“Precisely. In all likeliness, this one was given by this world’s enemy, the invading god. The day you requested this of me, I eliminated all other possibilities and tried every solution I could muster. I even got a god of death involved. Unfortunately, none of us are strong enough to combat the curse by ourselves. We require direct contact with it to purge it, but any spirit that so much as brushes over her body will die. We attempted to use the humans here as a catalyst since they seemed to be unaffected, but once we flowed our spirit power through them, they immediately fell ill. There was a chance our powers were too great but that is hard to imagine with our precise control. The curse must have influenced them after sensing our presence.”

“But… from how you’re speaking, you at least have something in mind, right? Something that might work!”

Mei stared at Ryosei for a second before giving him a solemn nod.

“Correct. This curse… Shigo and I have studied it ever since your request. From that, we’ve found out a number of things. First, this curse dooms its victims upon reaching a specified time limit. Second, upon successful execution, it will search the world for its next victim until it regains its true form, likely a physical body. It is a curse that possesses its own will. A curse that only kills other people from inside their body because they lack the energy to kill others in a more direct way. And as for their target—any person related to the ambassadors.”

“A curse that hunts ambassadors…”

“Yes. This woman was unfortunately the victim of this curse. But, perhaps we should be thanking her more rather than pitying her.”

“What?”

To clear the confusion on Ryosei’s face, Mei pointed to Yuriko’s chest.

“Do you know what that is?”

“It's… a necklace… and it's glowing!”

Ryosei didn’t notice before as he thought it was just the reflection of the glow coming from Mei’s hands, but now it was a lot brighter and it was clear it was emitting its own light. The small white pearl chained in miniature silver chains made itself apparent.

“That is Divine Weapon.”

“It is!?”

Mei nodded.

“The owner of that weapon is Yutei Katashi. We know him very well as a comrade in the past. We do not know where he disappeared to but we would never mistake his weapon. We have only seen his weapon in action only once before he removed it from his arsenal completely. Just as he explained to us before, he would rather continue as an ambassador who uses inferior weapons if it meant protecting his family. Since Divine Weapons can be used by blood relatives of their respective owners, any blood relative of Katashi who possesses that weapon will be given the blessing that he once wielded—Immortality.”

Ryosei’s eyes went wide at this revelation. Mei continued.

“I would not say that this result was the best for everyone, but I will stand to say that this result was the one that brought the least casualties. Even if Yutei Yuriko’s body and soul should have given out long ago, with that necklace around her neck, she will never succumb to the curse. But, now we are faced with a different problem.”

“What is that?”

“With the new generation of ambassadors officially declared—that Divine Weapon’s owner is no longer Yutei Katashi, therefore, its blessing will no longer be immortality.”

“B-But wouldn’t that mean she lost her immortality earlier this morning when Freda-san sent the others to Zerid? Can she have lasted that long without it?”

“No, but that is because the owner of this Divine Weapon had yet to claim it for themselves, so its blessing remains the same. But, the glow we see here is exactly just that. Right now, its current owner is trying their hardest to claim their weapon. Even when they are far apart, the weapon is responding to their will. Would you happen to know who they are?”

“The owner…”

Ryosei didn’t need to think hard about her question. After all, he knew the truth. One of the six ambassadors who gathered in Honshou Academy. About one week ago, when he first confronted Freda about Senkyo and Yuu’s situation. Freda first revealed everything she planned to announce to the other ambassadors and to the Konjou Clan. This included her purpose and also the names of the people affected. The moment he heard a familiar name—Yutei Yukai—Ryosei made a request.

“Freda-san… could you please not include Yukai-chan in this?”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“She is better off living a normal life. If you are who you say you are then you know exactly what this would do the moment you announce it.”

“So you are worried about her… but, this is not your choice to make. The only person who should decide that is none other than Yutei Yukai-san herself.”

“Then, are you telling me that it’s alright to get someone, who had completely no relations with any of the supernatural and the other worlds, to get involved in such a dangerous time?”

“Other ambassadors in the past had the same experience. Perhaps their times weren’t so precarious but having knowledge is better than none. Let me remind you, Konjou-san, with the god of the spirit realm dead, our enemies will next target Heroes and Hfixesi to kill the remaining gods. Are you certain it would be wise to leave Yutei Yukai-san in the dark when she can be their next target? They may not have one now, but what will happen if they become able to detect ambassadors even if they do not have their blessing? I do not want to come out as threatening you but… I know very well…… all too well, in fact, what would happen if you keep passing every incomprehensible possibility as an impossibility. This is a warning, Konjou-san. I think it is for the best that she knows about this. If she still chooses to pursue a normal life, then I will say no more.”

“…”

Ryosei fell silent. Her argument was perfect. Even he agreed with her, deep down. Her logic was sound and even he knew the dangers of disregarding possibilities just because he didn’t want to accept it. But still, he felt as if there was a better way to handle the situation. He felt like if Freda announced Yukai’s title in front of everyone, she would no longer have the free will that she spoke of at that very moment. Even if she was told in private, the result would be the same. After all, he knew how Yukai truly was. If she was told she had a position to fill, then she would bottle up her feelings and live only to serve. There will be no choices. He didn’t want that.

“No. Even so, I still think going down that path is the wrong decision.”

He declared openly. Freda stayed silent, urging Ryosei to expound on his claim.

“Yukai-chan isn’t like any normal girl. She’s both strong and weak at the same time. Sometimes she would be meek and then show her strength on the very next second. But I know, if you do this, you will force her to pretend like she is always strong until she breaks. I won’t let you do that.”

A pause. The noise fell and only silence and Freda’s scrutinizing gaze remained with Ryosei at the defense. Once the seconds of judgment passed, Freda gave a light nod. It was her approval.

“…Then, what do you propose we do?”

“Refute her position as an ambassador, but give her blessing to her. If Divine Weapons work as you say they do, then the results will show themselves what path she takes.”

“Are you certain? This will only work when her Divine Weapon is within her reach.”

“Then all I have to do is find where it is.”

And find it, he did.

**443 – Cursed Power**

“Yutei Yukai. That is the name of that weapon’s current owner. She’s someone I know.”

Said Ryosei to Mei.

“Oh, you know of her. Then that should make things simple. If anything, this glow should mean that she is in a position where she wants power… It does not necessarily mean that she is in danger. She could be yearning for it right now on her lonesome, but because of that, the Divine Weapon’s power is changing. At first, it might seem like a terrible situation, but the fact about Divine Weapons when they change power, is that they first increase that power.”

Mei waved her glowing hand and another flutter of butterflies came out and made a wide circle with Yuriko at the center while Mei and Ryosei were on the side. Shigo entered the circle along with the two and summoned his scythe.

“As you can observe, Yutei Yuriko’s complexity is better than in the past. The Divine Weapon’s power of immortality is giving her more energy. At its peak, the weapon’s blessing will change, at which we will attempt to purge the curse. However, I doubt that weakening the curse will remove its lethality. With a single touch, even us with the status of god will die.”

Her gaze shifted to Shigo for a second before returning to him.

“What we need is a catalyst that can withstand this—you.”

“Me? Why would I be able to do that?”

“Because~! Young Prince, you have the exact same stench of death as the curse lying dormant within you~! It’s amazing, really.”

Shigo cut in, sending ripples of confusion across Ryosei’s face.

“Does that mean that the same curse is inside me…?”

“Mnnn~! Not quite. In the first place, we didn’t know this curse originated from a true god. When I first inspected her… I immediately noticed that she had the same presence as you did.”

“The same presence as me…”

Ryosei tested his words, trying to dig into what they were alluding to. Shigo clapped his hands together, cutting off his concentration and forcibly progressing the conversation.

“Well~! None of us will truly know what any of this means through only words. We better move on to something a bit more practical before it’s too late.”

“I agree. Ryosei-san, as of now, you are the only person we know who may have a chance against this curse. We do not know why, but the curse has a striking similarity to your presence. Shigo mentioned that there should be no problem with you making contact with it. Even so, this process may still go wrong in many ways than one. If you are not prepared to tackle it, then you are free to go.”

“…What are you going to do?”

Mei took a moment of silence before answering.

“As this was your request of me for bringing back my daughter to safety, I would attempt to purge the curse regardless of the danger. Not to mention that the spirit bond you made with her will not allow me to run away from this.”

“You plan on dying.”

“Take it how you will.”

Ryosei pinched the bridge of his nose. In a way, Mei’s self-sacrifice was noble, prioritizing the safety of her child, who would be doomed to an unfulfilled spirit bond, but that only served to make everything more complicated. He didn’t want ANYONE to die. If Mei would die for Yuriko then who knew how Yukai and Chouka’s relationship would deteriorate.

“Shigo-san, are you sure that it’s alright for me to touch her?”

“If you can control that power fully, then it’ll be no different from breathing. I mean—”

Shigo flicked his finger upward and a throng of arm-shaped shadows wrapped around his entire body. It gave Ryosei a start but stood strong upon recognizing it was only Shigo’s doing.

“—Just like Lady Mei confirmed earlier, even though the presence of the curse within you is dormant, it is much stronger than the one inside this woman.”

Ryosei paused at the implications of his words.

“Now~! If you want to get this over with, please get away from the Young Prince, Lady Mei. Once I force the presence of his curse to surface, making contact with him may be just as deadly, if not, worse than making contact with the woman.”

Mei turned to Ryosei.

“Ryosei-san, are you certain about this?”

“Yes. It’s not like I can just pretend I didn’t learn about this strange curse either. If I can use it for the better, then I’ll do exactly just that.”

Mei said nothing more and gave distance. She turned to Yuriko and summoned butterflies to shape an orb in front of her palms, pointing at her.

“Let us begin. Prepare yourself, Young Prince.”

The grip of the shadowy hands around him tightened like a vice. Their aura of darkness spread to his surroundings. Then, a familiar feeling overcame his body.

His body was obscured by black clouds and the shadowy arms around him began to disintegrate, but taking away his vision didn’t stop him from recognizing what was happening to his body. This had happened once before. Quite recently, actually; just under 2 weeks ago, so he had no problem losing control as Shigo might have feared.

Once the clouds cleared, Ryosei was revealed donning caliginous armor. Dark, shadowy plates adorned with brilliant gold that twinkled in the night. His back was covered by a nebulous cape as if a mist was constantly shaping it. His visor glowed deep blue, tracing his pupils like a flame.

Grand and deadly, the epitome of death. The very armor that Senkyo once donned in a blind rage for vengeance against their skeleton assailants. But, unlike before, it was Ryosei under the armor and he had complete control of it.

“T-This is…”

“A Calamity Knight.”

Mei finished Shigo’s train of thought. Curious, he turned to her.

“We have no idea what trials the Heroes had to face in the incident 17 years ago. But, those who survived did not fail to inform us of the dangers that escaped them. Ryosei-san, your current appearance matches the enemies that they described.”

“So this was an enemy… but why would it be inside me?”

“Excuse me~! Does that really matter right now? We’re running out of time here!”

Shigo pointed to the necklace around Yuriko. It was shining brightly like a brand-new lightbulb. Any time now the Divine Weapon’s power will reach its peak.

“Young Prince, please control your power so that we won’t get hurt just by touching you!”

“Okay, I think I can do that!”

Ryosei could feel the strange sensation of death over his skin. Every time he focused on it, he was reminded of the moment Yuu blocked the skeleton’s attack on Senkyo. It was Senkyo’s emotions surging through his entire being. He felt like if he let his guard down, he would get swept away in those rampaging emotions. So he bottled everything up in a single point.

“That should do it!”

A shadowy hand emerged from the ground and touched Ryosei. Unlike what happened with the previous ones, this one didn’t disintegrate into nothingness.

“It’s safe. Lady Mei.”

“Yes.”

Both gods walked up and made contact with Ryosei’s back. The orb of butterflies that were once on Mei’s palms now entered Ryosei’s body. As for Shigo, he held up his scythe and accumulated a ball of darkness with it, pressing it into Ryosei’s body just like Mei did with her butterflies.

“Ryosei-san, on my signal, please make contact with Yutei Yuriko’s heart. The core of the curse lies within it. But do not pour any of your energy into her. Strictly only make contact. Let us handle the rest.”

“Understood.”

Mei and Shigo kept a sharp eye on the glowing necklace. Meanwhile, Ryosei focused on controlling his cursed power, making sure he didn’t accidentally pour it into Yuriko.

“Now!”

Hearing Mei’s call, Ryosei brought down his hand. Upon contact, Mei and Shigo increased their power, making them release a white and black light, respectively. Then, once the light cleared, the Divine Weapon’s energy died down, bringing the room back to its normal, dim ambiance. The butterflies that fluttered around the four to form a barrier returned to Mei, finished with their task. The only thing different from before was that there was no longer any strain on Yuriko’s body.

“Ka… D-Did it work?”

Shin, who was silently watching the event happen on the side, gave his piece. Compared to when they first arrived, they didn’t feel any pressure coming from Yuriko’s body. But, that didn’t necessarily mean that she survived. The curse could have been purged along with her life in an unexpected accident. But, the question on everyone’s head was answered by none other than the person in question.

“…— ….—!”

Yuriko’s eyes thinly opened. Her hand covered her mouth as she tried to speak for the first time since her last wake. Her voice, dry. Yet, she still pushed herself to speak.

“Please, don’t strain yourself.”

Ryosei was the first to speak, getting closer to her bedside and removing the energy that formed the helmet and gauntlets of his death-born armor. Yuriko’s eyes met Ryosei’s. She removed her hand from her mouth and clasped the pearl of her necklace. Then, she forced the words out of her mouth.

“…—ank… ou… Tha….nk… yo…u. Ryo…sei…kun.”

The shock was clear on his face as Yukai’s mother uttered his name. But, just as he was about to ask about it, Yuriko continued. This time with a clearer voice.

“She… works the hardest… out of everyone… She… needs… someone to be with her… even if… that person… isn’t me… so… please… Keep protecting her… and taking care of her…”

“Miss…”

Then, Yuriko directed her gaze to her necklace. Ryosei followed it, and there, he found that it was smeared in blood. Blood that came from a small wound on her thumb, most likely from when she first brought it to her mouth.

“Wait, that’s—”

She then recited.

“Unbind the manacles of my zenith.”

The necklace once again regained its lost luster, illuminating the room in a bright white light.

“Please… help your owner.”

*“\*Speaker: Yutei Yuriko, mother of Yutei Yukai. Order acknowledged.\*”*

A man’s voice echoed around the room. Then, the bright light disappeared as quickly as it emerged, and along with it went the necklace that was once on Yuriko’s person.

“W-What… just happened?”

Only Shin could break the silence with his clueless expression. Yuriko became unconscious, likely from using all her energy to activate the Divine Weapon’s release factor. She was still alive, but certainly out of energy. As everyone present was trying to ascertain the situation, Ryosei’s body disappeared a little while later.

**444 – Sword and Shield**

“What!?”

Yukai gave a start, seeing strangers covered in white robes with red accents. They had masks and gloves, revealing only their eyes. Anyone would recognize them as assassins immediately, and that seemed to be what they were. But, what frightened Yukai more was that they were clearly not human. Over half of them possessed arachnid traits while others had horns or wings on their backs.

*“\*Analysis: Enemy attack. They seem to have originated from Zerid. They were waiting for the dimension you created to crumble.\*”*

“E-Enai! Protect everyone!”

*“\*Analysis: what do you mean by ‘everyone?’\*”*

“E-Everyone that was inside that dimension earlier!”

*“*\**Analysis: COMPLETE. Order: acknowledged. Requirement: none. Execution: COMMENCE!!*\**”*

Once the invaders fully materialized their bodies, they immediately began their assault. The ones with arachnid traits created webs all around the room while the non-arachnids used both magic and physical strength to attack Yukai. Before any could make contact, a circular ray of light emerged from below and shielded her. The same protection was granted to Chouka, Yin, and Yang. All physical attacks were blocked while the magical attacks were reflected, some even grazing fellow assailants.

“U-Umm, what do we do, Enai!?”

*“\*Analysis: if this level of attack persists, our defenses will last a day with you only having to sacrifice minimal energy. Granted, if nothing changes. The webs the enemy is creating seem to be following some kind of pattern. They could be creating an unknown magic circle. I suggest you do everything in your power to stop them before they complete it.\*”*

“How do I do that!?”

*“\*Solution One: sacrifice your energy to retaliate against the enemy. Solution Two: summon your sword.\*”*

“M-My sword? I have a sword too?”

*“\*In all technicalities, yes. I daresay it is your most powerful weapon that requires no sacrifices. Using that will be most beneficial for a beginner like you. Will you use it?\*”*

“Yes! Whatever it is, use it!”

*“\*Very well. Due to this dire situation, I will summon him for you. Please do your best to be self-sufficient in the future.\*”*

“Him…? But I thought—”

*“\*Soul Resonance.\*”*

Before Yukai could comment on Enai’s choice of words, a blue flame appeared in front of her. A familiar light that she could never forget. It was a unique kind of marker that revealed the position of a very important person to her. But unlike before, she was certain that nothing was there except a blue flame.

*“\*Grasp it, Master.\*”*

“W-What, wait, isn’t this—”

*“\*It is exactly as you think. That flame is connected to your very soul. It is both a part of you, as well as a being that has a completely different existence from you. You are bound to each other with something more powerful than a Divine Weapon like I can produce. Please, use it.\*”*

“But that would bother him! I don’t want to bring him to any place dangerous!”

*“\*I am certain he would think the same if he were in your position. But you must not mistake the purpose of this power. You two are equals who have a united spirit forged from a bond long ago. If you die here, it could cripple your counterpart severely. The both of you are strongest together. You are his shield, and he is your sword. If you do not want harm to befall him, then fulfill your role.\*”*

“I’m… his shield…”

Yukai’s eyes fell on the weapon in her hands. Her hand was gripping the pure white tower shield with golden rims, a mysterious weapon given to her by the voice inside her head. She didn’t know what was happening around her, but she was certain of one thing: with this strength, with this power, she would be able to help the people around her. And with what Enai said, she would become of use to him. With her gathered courage pushing her forward, she extended her hand and grasped the blue flame in front of her. Suddenly, a strange mist appeared in her vision with a menacing tower of armor beyond it. But, she knew the identity of the person beneath it.

“Enai, protect Ryosei-nii-san!”

*“\*Order acknowledged.\*”*

**…………**

“What?”

One after another, the strange events happening that night had yet to cease. First, Ryosei had to fight against incomprehensible enemies that wouldn’t die to existence-eating flames, then he had to learn of a strange curse that apparently took the shape of his current appearance, which he somehow already had control of, and as if all of that wasn’t enough, a single blink of an eye took him out of the hospital room he was inside and was dragged to a completely different place entirely. He couldn’t express how confused and tired he was, but what never dulled was his senses. Bloodlust was directed straight at him the moment he appeared in this new location, instinctively making him re-equip the helmet and gauntlets he released when he talked to Yuriko.

A quick glance around him made him determine that the ones in white robes were his enemies, as for the people inside the screens of light…

“Enai, protect Ryosei-nii-san!”

It seemed like he didn’t need to worry about them. Behind him was the very girl that he was worried about not too long ago. She stood strong with a large shield in hand. With her otherworldly getup, he was sure that it was because of the release factor that her mother activated for her back in the hospital. He didn’t expect the night to end up in such a mess, but one thing was certain, and that was Yukai’s answer.

As if to prove her point, Ryosei’s body felt light and strength surged through his body. The same sheet of light that protected Chouka, Yukai, and the other two people whose faces looked familiar, covered the surface of his armor without being a hindrance to his movements.

He didn’t think Yukai was capable of doing everything by herself, seeing as she was only dragged into this situation. On the contrary, it was undeniable that it was her power he was sensing and that she was handling it with strength and precision. He had to talk to her later, but first on his to-do list was to eradicate the threats inside the room while leaving some alive to shakedown for information. The barrier Yukai gave him dealt with the projectiles launched at him perfectly. When the others decided to challenge him to melee combat, he moved his body and found himself gripping the enemy’s head like a vice in an instant. Yukai’s support was superb, but this was mostly the work of the armor wrapping around his body. Frankly, he felt indestructible.

The pressure Ryosei placed on the battlefield finally became apparent to his enemies as some of them shrunk back. The room became dense in spiderwebs because of the enemies with arachnid traits that stood near the walls. Instinct told him to cut down the webs before something terrible happened, so he manipulated the power he collected within him to bind the person in his hand in a plethora of shadows that emerged from the ground.

Thinking back to how Senkyo manipulated this form, he called upon Kuro Yaiba, or at least the form it was supposed to take with his death-born armor equipped. A rayless blade that stretched half a meter in length appeared in his hand. The blade’s guard swiveled around the blade, which questioned the need for its existence, but he did remember that a dark, misty cloud expanded the blade’s edge over three times its length to make up for the design drawback. Except, there was no misty cloud to show.

Ryosei tried to figure out how the power in his current form worked as he leisurely passed through the enemies that tried to attack him while he approached the arachnids near the walls and cut down as many spiderwebs as he could. He figured out a few things from his little display of power. He could emit an aura of death that took the consciousness of people who couldn’t handle it. He figured he could increase it and make it cause instant death, but since he wanted information later, he kept it as is.

With the ranged enemies unable to harm him thanks to Yukai’s protection, their only defense against him was melee fighters. The strong ones that withstood his aura were subjected to a punch that siphoned their energy with every blow, needing him to throw only one, at most two, punches to every enemy. Then, when he finally got the handle of his power, he channeled it through his blade and thrust it into the fleeing arachnids, stretching its length using a dark, misty cloud. The said cloud could not only increase the blade’s reach, but it was also malleable, allowing him to keep its length thin and long, as well as thrash it around to rid of the spiderwebs across the room.

It was at that moment that the enemies determined there was no chance of winning and disappeared from the room using traveler’s gems. Just like the ones the skeletons they fought in the past had, it allowed them to escape him through a rift leading to another world. The assailants in white robes tried their best to save as many of their allies as they could, or at least secure or break the traveler’s gems that their unconscious allies possessed, but Ryosei didn’t allow that and denied as many of their attempts as he could. Left with no other choice, the white robes sought safety in Zerid while the rest of them were left in the room either fallen unconscious or bound by black shadows.

When he looked around the room to ensure that there were no other threats left, he saw Chouka sighing in relief in her protective screen, Yukai with a bright expression on her face, and the other two people who looked familiar with eyes wide in awe. Well, at least the girl had an eye-wide expression. The other one who looked like a ghoul kept growling at him threateningly. Ignoring them for now, Ryosei turned to Yukai and Chouka.

“Are you two alright?”

“Y-Yes! Thanks to you, Ryosei-nii-san, none of us got hurt.”

“That was amazing… but what WAS that? I’ve never seen it before!”

After releasing the light barriers on Yukai and Chouka, the two crowded Ryosei with questions. Though Ryosei would like to deal with them, a sudden wave of exhaustion struck his body.

“!!!”

He gave a start, then immediately released the cursed power wrapping around his body. It was a single moment that decided between life and death. The goosebumps on his skin were proof that he realized that if he was even a second late in releasing his death-born armor, the rampaging emotions that he kept bottled up would have taken over his body. He fell to his knees and let out a deep sigh.

“R-Ryosei-nii-san!?”

“Ryo-chan!?”

Whatever that power was, Ryosei realized that it was as deadly to him as it was to his enemies. He hoped for a future where he wouldn’t need to use it again, but he felt like that was going to be nothing but a fleeting dream.

“I’m tired…”

**445 – A**

“This is…”

A momentary blur greeted Ryosei’s wake and the memories of last night’s events slowly flowed through his head.

“After that…”

When he released the cursed form that Shigo let him manifest, the following events were fuzzy but he still remembered, not that there was much to take into account either. The cursed form that Ryosei took on required a physical body, or so he theorized. This was because Ryosei was manifested in his human body.

The person who he assumed to be Senkyo donned caliginous armor, dark, shadowy plates garnished with brilliant gold that twinkled in the night. His back was covered by a nebulous cape as if the mist was constantly shaping it. His visor glowed deep blue, tracing the pupils of his eyes like a flame.

     His grand, imposing armor wasn’t the only thing to behold. His armored gauntlets clasped the hilt to a beclouded blade resting on his shoulder plates. The dark rayless blade stretched half a meter with the guard swiveling around the blade, but that was only the blade. In addition to the blade, a dark, misty cloud wrapped the blade’s edges, expanding over three times its length.

     Haruto couldn’t get rid of the terror he was giving off. He was the epitome of death. Grand and deadly.

Give up? -> saved by Shin -> foreshadowing convo(because of Iroha) -> talk about the Umbral Squall? -> eh? Mei? Yukai?

How chouka got inside of the barrier

Oni – Enju Yamagami

Fox Spirit – Iroha

Spirited Soul – Yukito Togiya (core is with Hiroto, weapon is body)

Ghost – Yin

Ghoul – Yang

Situation: Vilane will strike the moment she realizes Ryosei and Chouka are Di Manes

Enny already explained to Shigo and Mei

The two explain the situation to Ryosei and Chouka

Enny can’t follow Vilane outside of the Spirit Realm because she can make convincing doubles and an instantaneous information network

Advises Ryosei to stay in the True Spirit Realm

They dodged Vilane’s surveillance when they: entered Raqaev’s workshop.

Yukai summoned them

<<--------------------------------------------------------\*---------------------------------------------------->>

“Never underestimate the power of those who desire to live. For they, no matter how small they may look to higher beings beyond our comprehension, have the most potential to bring them down. It is not a matter of persistence, determination, arrogance, caution, passion, or any of the sort. It is the one, absolute rule of nature that no being, no matter how high, can escape. It is an eventuality. Just like how I will eventually meet an end, you will too.”

**<<--------------------------------------------------------\*---------------------------------------------------->>**

It was something like a small brown vegetable-like faceless cartoon character that you would find in television shows. It was about the size of the tip of his finger, waving at him with its little stubby arms as it got out of the floor with its little stubby legs.

Crawlers will be given a specialized identification card to serve as proof of their identity as a crawler. This card may also function as a general identification card. To maintain an active status as a crawler, they must complete at least two missions every month. Otherwise, they would have their active status revoked, and in simple terms, be fired. The only way for them to become a crawler again is to pass tests just like before.

Voyager’s job is to keep Sunken Nests from getting out of control and balance its ecosystem. The Roaming Ace is a title given to the best-performing Voyager, so it’d do you good to complete missions given to you in one or two days upon arrival just to prove your power. Both of these combined make you exempt from the two mission per month requirement to maintain your status as an active Crawler. Instead, your quota is once every three months.

“I knew you could use the creation element, so these blades are based around that. They can be used to conduct every magic element. It also has Circuits engraved at the base of its blade that was specially made to have the creation element flow through it.”

“Y-You see, we vampires, don't need to suck human blood to survive. Other food humans eat can also work. It’s just that blood is the most effective, as long as it's the red kind of blood, that is. Although human blood is still the best tasting for us. So...”

Kidnap Hira at some point

A simple explanation for why he lost his memories was because the Soul refused to do anything about it. But, Shiro wasn’t expecting any help from the Soul in the first place. Everything that Senkyo’s father was trying to do for him would have been lost if it did. This is also why she adamantly refused to talk about its existence.

Ranat knew about the memory demon so she helped Senkyo and Shiro by telling them more about the familiar contract.

Spellbooks of the elements of water, nature, earth, frost, lightning, light, dark, and finally, the last book he was about to grab from the shelves, control. The two that remained on his left were the spellbooks for nature and control and the one he just finished was the spellbook for the water element.

<Ranat taught Shiro dope null magic>

R2-S stands for Research Year 2, Level S! A place only for the most talented people in our year!

Vleid, Ruerg’s; Raeri

One was a woman with white hair and red eyes donning an azure battle suit with what seemed to be a thin exoskeleton attached to her. Based on her human looks, she seemed to be a Sorun. Meanwhile, the other was a large man with black and brown scales all over his body, reptile feet, sharp claws, a tail, two bright red horns on their head, two sharp protrusions on their back, and a face that looked similar to a dragon. Such a man had a carmine battle suit and a large exoskeleton frame that made it look like he was half machine.

Voaul Oqr – Discoverer of calamitous energy and the man that once held the soul of the Divine Soul of Spirits

Aagri - Dragon Species (Fire)

Dwrol Stones - Stones that have the power to repel mana when it builds a "sealed" 3D space.

Sealed - 3D shape built with dwrol stones that have a maximum distance of 30 centimeters

Pure ARCana - A concentrated substance that is created through the wear of an ARC-Mana core. Very sensitive. If it is exposed, it turns to a plain melted substance (transparent) that has no use. When it makes contact with a massive amount of mana at a single time, typically exposed mana, it produces a powerful spark of energy. If it is unfiltered, the energy will only cause an explosion. But, if used properly, it can empower the mana that was used to spark its power.

It seems that both Iaq and Xeoi turned to what they were because of a strange reaction from having dark essence and moon essence mixed in an environment where mana and spirit power are separate. This subject requires further research. However, what truly concerns me is END’s movement. If they truly wanted to take control of the spirit core, there was no need for negotiations in the first place. They could have sent in a whole army instead of sending a small force to deal with us.

“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.

Give Eksert (Senkyo):

Silent Mask (Equipment)

* Silence any words spoken

D. Scout (Machine) [2]

* Small Drone controlled by mana
* A set of white hexagon-shaped devices that can build and rebuild the drone
* Uses light magic to capture and send the image to a contact lens
* Contact lens can display the image on the surface or project it for others to see
* Can go invisible

Recall Point (Machine) [3]

* Hexagon-shaped Metal Device
* Can go invisible
* They can only be configured with the recall point and the crystals being near each other using Spirit Power.

R. Explosives (Machine) [50-10]

* Small Circular Devices with an Orange Gem in their Center
* Activated by destroying linked explosives (Spirit Circuit)
* As thin as disks
* Can go invisible

Recall Crystals (Consumables) [25-7-2]

* Small Crystal Orb w/ scintillating colors of purple, blue, and red with red at its core and purple and blue spiraling around it.
* Many crystals can be connected to a single Point, but their connection cannot be severed no matter the distance apart from destroying the recall point.
* Already connected crystals cannot connect to other Points without severing the existing connection.
* Destroying the crystals activates the teleportation.
* The teleportation can also be forcefully activated using the Spirit Power of the person who last configured the devices, but doing so also breaks the crystal.

Iordr Metal (Accessories) [10]

For Garin:

2,099 Hjor for the Plate of the Bloodcrazed Beast

1,599 Hjor for a pair of Kindred Beast Daggers

1,000 Hjor for two Bands of Magic Power

949 Hjor for a pair of Modified Gloves of Magic Threads (Garin Based)

749 Hjor for a pair of Modified Boots of Gravity (Garin Based)

699 Hjor for a set of Physically Structured Magic Needles

599 Hjor for a Magic Nullifying Mantle

The reason for that is to hide the true nature of our power. From the outside, it would look like two different races coexisting in the Praqrev Forest, with different capabilities and different strengths and weaknesses. But in truth, our power is much more different

No records of where the true hero came from

When the heroes went back, they had no way to contact each other

Akira has a vial of Senkyo’s mana

Senkyo and Erezil had an argument when Yuu got knocked out (Ujlufi Arc)

Tell Senkyo to read about ailak stones; Sora learns about them

Spirit power to control the temperature combo w/ frost element

Spirit power to do wide-ranged intimidate

Spirit power to control teleportation

Orbs have spirit formations in them

It had scintillating colors of purple, blue, and red with red at its core and purple and blue spiraling around it.

Shield Stuck Disarm

Take Shiro to a mall

Teleportation made by early Heroes

Each and everyone from every race, no matter how different they are, has a common ability to discern the hostility of another person.

she was eating some kind of grilled… seafood(?) on a stick. It wasn’t just the simple problem of the food looking absolutely horrendous, but it was moving along with it! It was some kind of mix of a sea slug, a fish, and tentacles on its back that wriggled slightly from time to time.

Conditions:

Soul

3x Mana

Chant