Spirits and Shamans

By Wyatt Wilke

To those who continued pushing on after suffering from their trauma

Chapter 1: Awakening

Ace had arrived at the orphanage when he was only two years old and lived there day after day for fifteen years.

Days like these were all too familiar for Ace Hawkins, one of the longest residents still living at the Blazing Bright Orphanage. Days where populous clouds hid the sun behind dark clumps of gray. Days where rain poured in an endless barrage from the sky. Days where unlit Christmas decorations had been strung up–forgotten, and long overdue for removal–all along the rows of repeated houses. Days where a gloomy shade was tainting the world, days where his luck was nothing short of miserable.

The only memento left by his parents was a birthmark just above his tailbone. For almost all of those fifteen years, he was relentlessly bullied and teased for his orphan status at his school–spare one student, his best friend, William Baker.

On the outside, Ace seemed like an average orphan, but on the inside, he kept a secret from everyone–from William, from the others at the Blazing Bright Orphanage. He could see ghosts, terrifying creatures with inhuman appendages and appearances that tormented his dreams and daily life alike. Every day he had to pretend as though the grotesque beasts surrounding him at every angle were simply not there. When he first started seeing them, he

believed they were his imaginary friends. As he grew older, he tried to deny their existence, leading him to lock away their existence–and the fact he could see them–in the confines of his mind.

It was a herculean task.

Little did he know that he was not the only one hiding the sight of ghosts.

Ace trudged through the horrible weather, on edge and paranoid. He felt like something was watching him–a ghost lurking behind a tree or around the corner of one of the concrete buildings forming a maze of infrastructure around him. He shoved his hands in his pockets, picking at his fingernails and scratching at them, chipping away at the material. His yellow rain boots stomped and squished in the wet mud, leaving a print of the sole of the shoe behind. Rain poured mercilessly from the dark gray sky, drenching him as thunder cracked in the distance. The cheap hood of the raincoat provided by the orphanage didn't protect his short-cut brown hair in the slightest, leading him to shrug off the useless fabric.

He brought one of his hands out of his pocket, using it to push his hair out of the way of his honey brown eyes, letting him better see the suspicious lack of ghosts. Normally, there'd always be at least one either in his periphery or directly in front of him, but there wasn't a hint of their existence now.

"Weird," he whispered to himself, the words barely reaching his own ears–the sound drowned out by the droplets of rain pounding on concrete. He shook his head, the less he had to think about the ghosts the better. Taking shelter under a nearby evergreen foliage, he took his backpack off and set it at his feet, sifting through it and looking for one specific book. His diary.

Despite his numerous objections, the caretakers at Blazing Bright had insisted that Ace keep a diary to record his feelings. They'd insisted it would help him cope with the bullying if he wrote it down. It didn't, but he needed to, the caretakers would scold him if they found out he skipped writing an entry again. He'd already brainstormed some bullet points to describe his lackluster eighteenth birthday–no one, not even the teachers, had remembered; not only that, William was absent from all the classes they'd shared that day.

Ace furrowed his brow upon realizing he didn't have his diary in his backpack. He checked again, sliding book after folder through to one side of his backpack–same result, no diary. Even though he couldn't find his diary, he remembered the entry he'd written about just yesterday.

He had described how William, in celebration of their second friendship anniversary, got Ace a cupcake. Not only that, he wrote that, later that day in the cafeteria, while William was talking about how bad the cafeteria food was, Ace had been staring at his crush. William had encouraged him to go talk to her and ask her out. So, he did. He was rejected and laughed at by the girl and her friends. William had comforted him after, but it was a vain attempt to comfort him.

He was about to check for his diary a third time over, just in case, but a familiar voice shouted to him from outside his line of sight.

"Watch out!" the familiar voice yelled, driving Ace to look up. He did so just in the nick of time, as the separated segment of a sword–starting from the tip and extending downward about an inch–was swinging straight for his skull. His eyes widened, and his body moved on its own, grabbing the straps of his

backpack and pulling it up to cover his face. The segment of the sword sliced into the backpack, cutting the cheap fabric and spilling its contents onto the muddy ground. As the sword continued swinging past him, Ace pulled his backpack down enough to get a better look at the sword.

The blade was separated into six segments, each segment connected to each other by a chain. The person with the familiar voice who held the sword pulled the handle close, and the segments melded into each other seamlessly, returning to the shape of a traditional sword. As his eyes followed the blade, he saw *what* the person was swinging at. A ghost. One that had tormented him an exceptional amount lately.

It was one of the more horrifying ones he had the displeasure of seeing. It had transparent skin that moved like the winds of a hurricane, stray leaves and pieces of trash being trapped in it–moving as blurs along with it. It extended two pale gaunt arms, sending blasts of wind towards the wielder of the silver-blade sword. The sound whirled in Ace's ears, and he had to cover them to stand the noise.

Once it had passed, for the first time, he got a good look of the person who had the familiar voice. He was a boy in his late teens, with a toned form hidden under baggy clothes and short cut brown hair messed up wildly from the winds of the ghost. He pushed the locks out of his face with a pale hand, revealing vibrant oak eyes that held an ocean of confidence behind them. He grinned at the ghost, not faltering as it let out an unearthly screech.

Ace's eyes widened with recognition as he realized the boy was William. Standing here, he looked completely different from the soft spoken,

overprotective boy he knew and called a friend at school. William dashed forward, weaving between a ball of wind and scraps, then another. In the blink of an eye, he had closed the distance between himself and the ghost, plunging the sword into its head and pushing it down before ripping it out mercilessly.

The ghost let out an unearthly sound of agony as it began to dissolve, its form turning into grains of sand and dust as it collapsed. A breeze blew the dust of the ghost away unceremoniously, some of it catching on William's jeans. "Rude," he said with a scoff to the ghost's remains, dusting them off as if chastising the ghost's poor manners.

He then diverted his attention to Ace, who was frozen in a mix of fear and shock. William's grin faltered as he realized his best friend had seen the whole sequence. He slid his sword into a leather sheath around his waist, the sound leaving a heavy silence between the two boys, only broken by the continued and inattentive pounding of the rain. After a moment's hesitation, Ace blinked himself back to reality and tentatively spoke.

"What… what just happened?" His voice shook as the words left his mouth, and, upon looking down, realized there was a tremor in his hands. He shoved them into his pockets, yet they still trembled even when confined by the fabric of his pants. In his mind, he questioned if he was dreaming, or if he had gone insane and that this was a sick, twisted concoction of his mind.

William's eyes darted away, taking a moment of consideration before responding. "Judging by your reaction, you saw me kill that Spirit, right?" he asked, drops of hesitance dripping through his words. His gaze went back to Ace's, making eye contact with the hazel irises that belonged to his best friend.

Ace hesitated, his heart wanting to spill the secret without thinking, but his mind telling him that was a horrible idea. As the war between his mind and his heart began raging on for the correct course of action, he blurted out the answer.

"Yeah," he paused, swallowing a lump in his throat. He rolled his shoulders, which suddenly felt lighter without the weight of the secret weighing them down. "I did. Ever since I could remember." Apparently, that wasn't the answer William was looking for, because he muttered some words under his breath that sounded suspiciously like curses.

William paused, debating something in his mind silently before speaking out again.

"In that case, I need to explain some things to you," William began, taking a deep breath to steel himself. "You see, Spirits are created from intense emotions–fear being the most powerful and common. These Spirits, or ghosts as you call them, hurt people for a reason unknown to us. They seek out those weak and vulnerable and slaughter them," William explained, trying to make the complex topic as simple as possible.

"Wait–us as in you and me?" Ace asked, gesturing for William to slow down. He was having a hard time processing the sudden mound of information dropped on him.

"Us as in the Shaman Society," William clarified. "The Shaman Society is a group of people–all with the Shaman Mark–hired to hunt and kill the Spirits before they can do the same to civilians."

Ace tried to speak, but he was too stunned to form words. William, the boy

Ace had seen mourn a fly with a mock-funeral and who believed violence was only a last result, was now telling him he was hired to kill Spirits? He was in utter disbelief. He sputtered out a response. “You– a– *what*?”

“A Shaman. I was hired to kill Spirits,” William explained slowly, talking to Ace like he was a child. “I have a Shaman Mark on my earlobe, which means I can see and, by extension, kill Spirits.” He put his finger behind his left ear, wiggling the earlobe and showing him what looked like an irregularly shaped birthmark–which must’ve been the Shaman Mark.

Ace blinked. His mind could barely make sense of the fact that William was a Shaman, that he could kill and see Spirits, and that he was part of a group mysteriously named the Shaman Society. He tried to speak slowly, but blurted out the words suddenly. “How do you even *kill* a Spirit?”

“Shaman Marks give ordinary people Blessings, which are superpowers in basically every way that matters. For example–” he removed a combination lock from his pocket, pulling on it to show that it was locked. Then, he tossed it a foot or two into the air, where it suddenly stopped, the knob suddenly twisting and turning in all directions before it suddenly *popped* and fell right back into William’s palm, unlocked. “–My power is Metal Control, I have complete control over any and all metals.”

“Woah,” was all Ace could respond with. His mind felt like it was melting inside his head.

“So, that being said, you have a decision to make. Because you can see Spirits, you must have a Shaman Mark as well, and a Blessing as a byproduct. You can either choose to use that Blessing to help me and the others in the

Shaman Society protect the nation from Spirits, or you can continue living a relatively normal life. Thus I ask, Ace Hawkins, which path will you choose?" William asked, putting on a dramatic voice.

Ace hesitated, mulling over the question in his head as he stared down at the muddy concrete beneath his feet. His brain blocked out the sounds of *pitter-pattering* rain as he thought, giving him peace and quiet in his mind. When he finally spoke, he understood it was the decision that would shape his life the most, the one choice that sent the rest of his years down a path radically different from the other. "I want to be a Shaman," he said.

There was a feeling deep in his heart that told him that somehow, someway, making this decision would lead him to his parents.

Chapter 2: Enrollment

William and Ace began walking towards a place unknown to Ace, who was still thinking about the decision he'd just made–to dedicate his life to Shamanism and the Shaman Society. Ace reached around his back and slid his fingers under his shirt, feeling what he had assumed was a birthmark just above his tailbone, now wondering if it could be his Shaman Mark.

Just yesterday, he would have never believed that he would've gone from living a mostly normal life to being aware he supposedly had a superhuman ability at his disposal. It made his train of thought run to a list of powers he could have. He thought of his favorite superheroes and villains, imagining himself as saving a city using whatever power he was granted.

The pair walked along silently, the mud *squelching* under the stomps of Ace's boots and William's sneakers. The soles of their shoes left footprints in the mud, leaving a mark that would be washed away by the rain as they trekked onward deeper into the city. Ace was snapped out of his thoughts as William suddenly spoke up.

"We're here," he said simply, pressing the button–which told him, in a robotic, prerecorded voice, to wait–on a street pole they were standing next to. They had come to a stop at an intersection with no buildings that particularly

stood out, with the exception of the abandoned apartment complex a block away.

Surrounded by a gang of concrete giants, the building had clearly failed the test of time, its corners and edges cracked and worn, revealing the inner rebar within. Its high walls were hugged with moss, the dark green color providing little contrast on the depressed building.

Ace raised a quizzical eyebrow. “So… where’s the Shaman Base?” Before Ace had gotten lost in his train of thought, William had told him about the main headquarters for the Shamans in the area, named the Shaman Base. He’d said that there were hundreds of Shaman Bases around the nation, usually in highly populated or tourist cities. The purpose of a Shaman Base was to act as a place for local Shamans to gather, as well as provide them with assignments to kill Spirits that were spotted in the area.

“*That* is the Shaman Base,” William said, pointing at the moss-hugged apartment complex.

“You’re kidding me. How can *that* be the base? It looks like it hasn’t been touched for fifty years!” Ace exclaimed, gesturing to it scornfully. He searched the block, hoping that he had misinterpreted where William had pointed, but no, William had pointed straight at the abandoned complex.

“It’s called a disguise, Ace. We can’t have non-Shamans stumbling into the Shaman Base unannounced,” William said as he walked across the street on the white-striped crosswalk. He made large strides, shoving his hands in his pockets to shield them from the cold breeze. Thankfully, the rain had let up, but that didn’t change the drenched state of their clothing and bodies. Ace sputtered

and stuttered in confusion before jogging up to William.

They approached the abandoned complex, pushing the creaking metal door inward–the sound of crunching glass and mice squeaking as they scurried away filling the silence of the room. The interior of the building looked just as bad, if not worse, than the exterior. It was dark and dank, small pools of murky water filling the cracked concrete floors. Each of the few furniture pieces were worn and damaged beyond repair.

William, unphased by the decaying building, walked past without a second glance at the decrepit state of what used to be the lobby. “Stop slacking, Ace, let’s go,” he called out behind him, not bothering to turn his head. Ace reluctantly followed, being particularly careful not to step in any of the puddles, especially after locating the source of them as a leak in the ceiling.

After briefly wandering down the hallway past the lobby, the pair stopped in front of an apartment door, bearing an age-worn metal plaque engraved with the number *101*. William reached out, twisted the handle, the door groaning as it opened, and walked into the apartment.

When Ace peered through the door, however, his eyes widened in surprise, for what was past the frame was not an apartment, but a lush opening through forest to a campus with wooden buildings and many people of all ages wandering and talking across its grounds. As far as he could tell, there were two main structures. The first was a wooden building with vibrant blue beams and three stories stacked like the layers of a ziggurat–or a wedding cake; the comparison made Ace’s stomach grumble.

The second building only showed a hint of its true form–its support beams

painted a bright crimson color. Most of the structure was hidden behind the first. “Woah,” he said for the second time that day, as William snapped him out of his trance-like state from a few yards into the clearing.

“Keep moving, Ace! You’ll have time to sightsee later!” He walked backwards as he spoke, gesturing for Ace to come with him. Ace decided it was best not to question the logic of a door leading to somewhere completely different and stepped through. When he did, it felt like he was moving at a million miles per hour, like his insides were being separated, rearranged, and reinserted. He nearly puked as he stumbled on the other side.

“You’ll get used to it; my first time was a lot like that too,” William said reassuringly, wincing when he saw the sickly look making up Ace’s expression. He shut the door behind Ace, and, with a hand on his back, he moved him along swiftly. Ace took in a deep breath, the chilly breeze having been replaced by warm air and a bright sun, not a cloud in the bright blue sky.

As the pair of boys walked, William elaborated more about Spirits. “You see, Spirits are formed from the intense negative emotions of a human. We classify the Spirits into one of two categories: Fear Spirits and Emotion Spirits. Fear Spirits are always exponentially stronger and are born from the phobias of people. Take the Spirit I killed earlier–the Fear Spirit of Tornadoes–as an example.” William stopped as they approached the front of a third building, one Ace hadn’t seen from the doorway.

It was about a third of the size of the first building, and its support beams were painted black, its roof much lower than the first, only having a singular floor.

“What’s this?” Ace asked, his eyes tracing the building’s walls, committing their shape to memory.

“This is where you’ll be enrolled into the Shaman Base and receive all your assignments,” William said, gesturing to the one-story building. He walked to the front door and grasped the doorknob. “Now come on, she’s expecting us–er, well, me.”

“Who?” Ace asked, garnering no response from William, who had already stepped through the door. Nailed onto the front door of the building was a sign reading ‘Theodora’s Office - Head Shaman.’ Ace shivered, the title giving the otherwise unassuming building an eerie aura that he couldn’t shake, not even as he stepped inside.

The interior of the building was consistent with its exterior. Wooden support beams were painted black. The paneled flooring seemed oddly hollow beneath his feet. What looked like a portable stove, ugly banana yellow plastic, was sitting idly on the floor. That, however, is where all normality stopped, for golden orbs of light in varying sizes–most ranging from the size of an eyeball to a baseball–floated in the air, scattered randomly throughout the room. Each one glowed bright enough to keep the entire room lit comfortably.

“Theodora, I got a new recruit for you!” William called out to the unseen Head Shaman, looking up at the hovering orbs as he stepped a few feet away from the center of the room. Just as Ace was about to question the balls of light, a particularly large one–about the size of a softball–descended to a foot above the ground, transforming right before their eyes.

The orb formed flesh and birthed bone, a human taking shape then and

there. It was an old woman with gray-streaked blonde hair that fell just past her back and wrinkles formed from age and stress all over her emotionless face, clustering at the edges of her eyes. At the edge of her lips was a Shaman Mark, spreading out onto her cheek in an oval shape. As she opened her eyes, Ace got a view of her irises, which were platinum gray with lines of a brighter white and, surprisingly, dots of gold. With a liver-spotted hand, she tugged at her toga, the pearly white fabric draping over her form stopping just above her ankles.

"Ace, meet Theodora, the last living descendant of the first ever Shaman, and officially the most powerful Shaman alive–and possibly to date." William bowed to the woman, and a hint of emotion flickered in Theodora's eyes before it died a second later.

She nodded to Ace. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Ace," she said, her voice gravelly and rough. She returned her attention to William, who was now standing next to him. "So, William, this is the recruit, yes?" she asked, sounding disinterested.

"Sure is, he's been able to see Spirits his entire life without *ever* using his blessing. If I know anything, which I do, then it's waiting to be let out. I'm confident he has mounds of pent up energy he doesn't even know about, I bet it's enough to send him up to Level X status too!"

Theodora rolled her eyes, a phantom of emotion that could be labeled as annoyance seeping into her voice. "Please, William. The last recruit you said could be Level X nailed his own hand to a wall after someone dared him to do it."

“I’m serious this time!” he exclaimed, sounding a bit like a whiny child. “You’ve *got* to believe me! There isn’t a doubt in my mind that he’ll become a Level X, but that’ll only happen if you accept him into the Shaman Society!”

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There was something about that boy–Ace. Theodora wouldn’t admit it, but William was onto something. Not because she trusted his instincts–he had as much intuition as an average pebble–but because she felt a change in the air as soon as Ace stepped onto the base. It was like the entire world had shifted in his wake, and she could discern it with ease now that he was right in front of her. She knew this feeling, she knew it when she met that man—Charles Green—only twenty years ago.

Potential.

Potential beyond comprehension.

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Theodora seemed to think for a moment, her eyes on the floor, then she looked up, speaking to William but not wavering eye contact with Ace. “I suppose he can be accepted. However, he will be under your and Yujiro’s guidance at all times.” She paused. “Now that I’ve made that condition clear, welcome to Shaman Society, Ace.” Theodora smiled with a muted type of

warmth, extending her hand for Ace to shake. After a moment's hesitation, he did so, yet he wondered why she had accepted him in so quickly. Maybe it was custom for new Shamans to get accepted so easily? He made a mental note to ask William about it later, dismissing it for the moment.

For now, though, he would be grateful to be accepted and have the opportunity to change his life for the better.

Chapter 3: A Warm Introduction

“Congratulations, Ace, for being enrolled in the Shaman Society. Be glad my amazing charisma and convincing argument got you into it in the first place,” William said, brushing his hair back dramatically.

“You were practically begging, William,” Ace said, killing his faux-cocky mood and warranting a frown. His back slumped over, overplaying how much Ace’s words affected him. The two exited Theodora’s office, stepping back onto the dirt clearing of the Shaman Base.

“Words hurt, y’know,” William said with a fake stern voice, wagging his finger up and down like he was scolding the other boy. “Anywho, let’s get you settled into the life of a student here. We can’t send you out to kill Spirits if you don’t even have a basic understanding of the necessary skills; I’ll even take the courtesy to introduce you to all your professors.” He continued to walk with Ace, leading him to the building with the red support beams.

“Before we do, I have a couple questions,” Ace spoke up, knowing that William, who’d stopped in his tracks to look back at Ace, had a tendency to go off track if given the chance. “First, what’s this Level X thing you all were talking about?”

“Ah, Level X,” William said with a hint of fondness in his voice. “You see,

Shamans are divided by their power into levels. There are five levels; D, C, B, A, and the strongest, X. Only the top of the top get to become Level X, and it's a very tedious process to go from A to X. Then again, it can't be that hard if I managed to pull it off."

"And you thought someone who nailed their hand to a wall would reach that?" Ace asked, playfully making William deflate once again. He moved on. "Then my second question. Theodora said I'd be under the guidance of you and someone named Yujiro? Who *is* Yujiro?"

As if fate had struck, a loud voice shouted out from the roof of the four-story building, "I am!" The owner of the voice, a boy that looked the same age as William and Ace, jumped from the roof he stood on, descending through the air. He crashed into the ground, though rose from it unscathed, brushing his hands off on his pants. With the exception of some mud and dirt, Yujiro was entirely unaffected. The Asian boy had pale skin, short black hair, and eyes a shade of green vibrant enough to make an emerald jealous. He wore a black hoodie–a size too big on him–and baggy jeans. The clothes draped over his form lazily.

William shook his head and rolled his eyes, but a playful smile was still on his face. "Yujiro, you still haven't grown out of your habit of grand entrances, I see. You're gonna give one of the recruits a heart attack someday, I'm calling it." Yujiro–who was noticeably shorter than William, but still taller than Ace–grinned in response.

"You know me too well to think I'm gonna stop, Will. I need to keep some things at least a little bit fun around here," he shrugged, then turned his

attention to Ace. “You must be Ace. Will has told me a lot about you.” He flashed a smile at him.

“He’s the new recruit, Yujiro, Theodora put him under our guidance for the time being,” William explained to Yujiro, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Where do you think we should start with the tour? Or should we get him settled in the dorms first?”

“Let’s introduce him to the professors first, he can lie in bed later,” Yujiro replied, then turned to Ace, smiling. “Well, you’ve already met two of them–me and William are the professors in armed combat and Blessing combat, respectively.”

Ace blinked, surprised. “Wait– you two are *professors*?” he said in disbelief, then repeated it as an exclamation, in even more disbelief. “You two are *professors*!” Ace was aware William was a powerful Shaman–and he had the same feeling about Yujiro, if only a bit less–but the fact he was powerful enough to be a teacher to recruits was a total shock.

William found his surprise amusing, letting it show on his expression. “Yeah, but we can save the autographs for later, we still have to introduce you to the others.” William began to swiftly walk away, not waiting for Ace to process the bomb of information. This day was only getting more and more complicated for him–every time he thought he got to the core of the onion, he peeled back another layer.

“Wait–!” Ace kicked up dirt as he jogged after William, finally snapping back to reality. When he finally caught up, he walked alongside the other boy. After a short walk, they arrived at the previously hidden building with red

support beams–it towered like a wooden obelisk, though shorter than the blue-beam building. A sign nailed onto one of the pillars read *'SHAMAN TRAINING CENTER.'* William pushed the door open, walking inside with Ace.

The room had a staircase going upstairs–hidden out of sight–and a split level floor design with a square section in the middle of the room lowered, positioned like an arena. The entire room had a steampunk vibe to it, copper pipes ran along the walls and; wisps of flames flickered inside the fanciful sconces lit by oil; and gears and cogs and other clockwork spun absently, creating a dull hum throughout the room.

"Meet RT-781, the Agility Training Professor," William said, gesturing to the lowered part of the floor where an automaton stood, its multi-metal machine form glistening under the lamplight. Steam *hissed* from the crevices between plates of copper and steel as the automata shifted its shape, a fist becoming a drill and thrusting forward at a girl it was brawling with.

The girl, with a sheen of sweat on her forehead, dodged the drill, stabbing at RT-781 with a spear. The machine dodged the stabs, using its other fist to send a punch right to her head, stopping it inches from her temple. "I WIN," it said, the drill on the end of its hand turning back into a fist as the girl collapsed, exhausted, on the floor, wiping her forehead dry and inhaling deeply to regain her breath.

"RT! Meet your new student, Ace!" William called out, making the robot crane its metallic head to look at the two. The whirring and revving of its engine became louder as it stomped closer to them, its bright glowing light

bulbs for eyes shining right on Ace.

“IT IS A PLEASURE TO MAKE YOUR ACQUAINTANCE,” it said, extending a hand for Ace, who hesitantly took the warm metal in his hand and shook it. He pulled his hand away as soon as he could afterward, wincing at the heat on his palm.

“Likewise,” he replied, eager to not get on the bad side of a professor that could turn its hand into a drill. The thought of it using the drill made him shiver, but he tried not to show it out of politeness.

William and Ace waved a quick goodbye to RT, ascending the stairwell and leaving the steampunk-style room. The second floor was starkly different, not having a single defining feature to it aside from its emptiness. In the middle of the room was a tall woman with bright blue eyes and brown hair wielding gauntlets that looked like they were made of electricity, sparking wildly as she threw punch after punch into a boy, who was defending himself by making an ‘x’ shape with his forearms.

The woman looked to be in her late thirties, with a resting frown and furrowed thin eyebrows on her pale face, and muscles bulging from under her clothing. “Heidi! New student!” William shouted, and when she didn’t give an inkling of a reaction, he frowned, then levitated his sword in the air with his Metal Control, sending it between the two people, interrupting their fight. Heidi’s fingers twitched and she glared sharply at William, but let down her fists nonetheless. The trainee eagerly took the much needed break. Heidi muttered curses in a language Ace didn’t understand as she walked over to them.

She stopped in front of Ace, her frown deepening along with her sharpened eyes. “This boy,” she began with a German accent, “he is not fit for being a Shaman. This boy is weak, no good. Take him away.” She waved dismissively, her words bubbling up with disdain.

“Don’t worry, Ace, she’s like that with every recruit,” William said with a reassuring smile, but Ace could see right through the lie–William always had a tell, drumming his fingers on the closest surface, in this case, the handle of his sword. Ace had a bad feeling about her, something just didn’t sit right. “Now, your last professor–Professor Ivanov.”

He nodded. William waved goodbye to Heidi while Ace didn’t. Heidi didn’t wave either. The pair went upstairs, their shoes making the wooden steps *creak* under them. The floor was similar to Heidi’s, but it had darker wooden boards for the walls and, on closer examination, scratches and other symbols of wear from age. It felt oddly welcoming.

In the middle of the room was an older man–somewhere around his mid forties–sitting and meditating, his eyes shut. He had pasty skin, wrinkled from age, though not as much as Theodora, and sparse gray and white hair on his balding head. A large Shaman Mark in the shape of a butterfly on his throat, shown partially hidden by the collar of his navy puffer jacket. His expression was stoic, but not stern, and seemingly on edge despite the tranquil environment.

He opened a brown eye, having heard William and Ace’s footsteps as they arrived in the room. His gaze darted to Ace. “A new recruit, I presume?” he asked with a wisp of a Slavic accent, standing up and revealing his full

height–shorter than Heidi, but no less intimidating.

“You’d be correct, Anatoly,” William responded. He gestured to Ace. “This is Ace, and he’ll be your new student.”

Anatoly nodded, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “Nice to meet you, Ace. I am Anatoly Ivanov, the professor for unarmed combat.” As he introduced himself, he did a respectful bow to Ace, which Ace returned. The three stood in an awkward silence, until William interrupted it.

“Ace, now that you’ve been introduced to all your professors, let’s get you in your dorm room.”

Today was already a long day, but it wasn’t even close to being over yet.

Chapter 4: Start anew

Ace was walking alongside William and Yujiro, who had tagged along when they left the Shaman Training Center. The three boys approached the only building they hadn't been to that afternoon–the one with a sign at the front reading 'DORMITORIES.'

"This'll be your new living quarters," Yujiro said as he gestured to the building.

"I got that from the big bold text reading 'DORMITORIES," Ace replied sarcastically. Yujiro, amused, jabbed his elbow into William, saying something to him in Japanese. Yujiro and William led him into the Dormitory building. Upon opening the door, the three were greeted by a large room.

The room had a muted red wallpaper, and a carpet with a gold line that directed them to either the left–the male side–or the right–the female side. The carpet went down two hallways of rooms and at the ends of the hallways were staircases that led to higher floors, where more dorm rooms were.

Screwed into the walls were old fashioned lanterns, in which flames on candle wicks danced and waved unpredictably behind the glass that was fogged up at the corners from the burning wax. The orange light radiating from it created a welcoming atmosphere.

“Follow me,” William said, leading Ace down the men’s side of the dormitory building. Yujiro followed them, the three boys’ footsteps *thunking* as they all ascended the stairs, walking past all the doors on the first floor, skipping the second entirely, and stopping once they reached the third.

William stopped in front of door number *‘319,’* and turned the doorknob, letting himself and the other two into the room. The room was quaint and small, the only two rooms being the bathroom and the bedroom. It had a plain bed, a small desk with a chair pushed into it, a small bookshelf, and a dresser. There was little color in the room, the palette mostly consisting of neutral colors like beige and tan.

Ace looked around, feeling a twinge of homesickness in his heart. His room back at the orphanage had a life and emotions tethered to it that this room lacked. It felt empty–emotionally–hollow. “Won’t the orphanage notice I’m gone?” he asked suddenly, remembering what he was homesick for.

“Already taken care of,” Yujiro responded. “You’re eighteen now, and thus considered a legal adult who doesn’t have orphan status. They might notice you're gone, but nothing will be done about it.” He said it reassuringly, but Ace wasn’t sure that the thought of the caretakers not doing anything was comforting.

William and Ace were about to walk away, but William stopped himself and turned around. “Actually, you probably have a lot of questions… Go ahead, ask. I know you have some.” Ace bit the inside of his cheek, wondering what he should ask. Well, he had to start somewhere.

“How many Blessings are there? Can two people have the same Blessing?

What's the strongest one? What–" The questions came out quickly, like an eruption of words from his mouth. William stopped him before he said too many, holding up his hand.

"I'll answer those three, then you need to get some rest, today's been a doozy for the both of us." He took a deep breath, putting up a finger to indicate he was answering the first question. "We don't know how many Blessings there are, since new ones are *still* being discovered, but there's hundreds at the least." He put up a second finger. "There are common, uncommon, and rare Blessings. Any number of people can have common and uncommon Blessings at a time, but only one person can have a rare Blessing, until that person dies and the rare Blessing goes back into cycle." A third finger. "It's not confirmed, but there's a legend that someone a long time ago had one called 'Cosmic Control,' which let him control gravity, fire, water, ice, rock, and air.

"Now, is that enough to satisfy you? I don't care, you look like you're gonna pass out any second now. Meet me at the Training Center in half an hour, 'kay? Kay."

He and Yujiro left, and Ace collapsed on his bed, falling asleep in the blink of an eye.

• • •

Ace awoke after hours to vigorous knocking on the door. He groaned, shifting on top of the bed, mumbling half-asleep protests as he tried to find a

comfortable position to fall back asleep. Finally, after another minute or so, he rose, still fully dressed–he hadn't even taken off his shoes before he knocked out–and went to the door, opening it to find William standing there.

"What do you want?" Ace grumbled sleepily.

"You have Blessing combat training with Yujiro, come on," William said sternly, dragging him out of his dorm room by the collar–literally–getting him to wake up fully, at which point he dragged himself to the Training Center, walking alongside William.

The sun beat down on both of them, Ace shielding his eyes from the light with his hand. William opened the door of the Training Center for Ace, both of them going inside. "Yujiro's floor is the fourth one; once you're done training with him you can go to Anatoly's and train with him." Ace nodded, climbing up the stairs as his drowsiness wore off.

Yujiro–with a katana, engraved in Japanese characters from hilt to tip, at his waist–called out to him with a bright smile. "Ace! Took you long enough, let's get started!" He gestured for Ace to come over, which he did. "The Blessing is the most important part of a Shaman. Without it, they would be essentially useless against a Spirit.

"Theodora's Blessing, for example, is Celestialism, meaning she can transform herself into light, create it, and manipulate it to her will. William's Blessing is Metal Control, which I'm sure he has demonstrated, but he can manipulate any metal to his will, on command." Yujiro paused, letting the information set.

"For our first lesson, we are going to find out *what* your Blessing is by

using this–" Yujiro reached into the pocket of his hoodie, taking out what looked like a marble made of fogged up glass. Drops of transparent green blue liquid dripped from it. Ace scrunched up his face in disgust.

"What is *that*?" he asked, eyeing it weirdly.

"This," Yujiro offered the orb to Ace. "Is a Soul Orb, a concoction first made in the ancient days of Shamanism. It awakens one's Blessing upon digestion. All you have to do is swallow it. It may taste like cough medicine, but it's either this or years of training for minimal reward."

Ace, reluctant and hesitant, reached for the Soul Orb, taking it in his hand. The weird slime on the orb stuck to his fingers unpleasantly. "I have to swallow it?" he asked grimly, looking up from it to Yujiro, who nodded encouragingly. Ace swallowed nervously, anticipating his next one would be less than enjoyable. He slowly brought it up to his lips, feeling the cold slime against them.

He bit the bullet, shoving it in his mouth and swallowing the marble. It burned as it slid down his throat, the taste like expired grape cough medicine. He collapsed to his knees, coughing and sputtering, the aftertaste almost as bad as the first taste. It was, by far, the worst thing he'd ever tasted.

"Well, you did better than most," Yujiro said once Ace finally recovered from his coughing fit. "Now, think of something you're passionate about, something you can always look forward to, something that'll push you even farther in a time of need."

Ace let his eyes close. He didn't even have to think about it, he knew exactly what it was that pushed him–to even do this in the first place. The

prospect motivated him to continue when time's got rough, to push him forward onward and onward.

His parents.

Finding his parents.

He felt a warmth spread from the tips of his fingers onward, crawling up his hand and arm. His eyes fluttered open, then widened when he realized the warmth was from a burning crackling fire igniting on his skin. Only, it didn't burn him, the flames swayed as he wished, obeying his thoughts. He had complete and utter control of fire.

• • •

Yujiro had never seen anyone awaken their Blessing as quickly as Ace did in that moment in front of him. He didn't even try to stop his face from contorting in surprise, especially as he willed the flames to move without so much as lifting a finger. In all his time at the Shaman Base, Yujiro had never seen someone use their Blessing so effectively just after obtaining it.

Was this potential?

It was.

Potential beyond anything he had ever seen.

• • •

Yujiro smiled, seeing the fire mold to Ace's desire. "That's quite the Blessing, Ace–Fire Control may be common, but there's a lot of power behind it, especially if you learn how to master it." Ace stared in awe at the flames curling around his arm. They didn't burn, they didn't hurt, they just were. "It's an offensive Blessing, so I'll teach you to get up-close-and-personal with the Spirits. It works best at close ranges."

Ace nodded, feeling freaked out at the red heat encircling his wrist, yet also undeniably giddy, unable to stop his mouth forcing itself into a grin. "Now, you ready to learn?" Yujiro asked, and he didn't wait for Ace to respond before jumping into an explanation on how to utilize his newfound abilities.

William watched from the corner of the room, having come from the stairs without either of the boys realizing. Soon enough, Ace was throwing sparks from his fingers easily, even making a small beam of fire–though it died quickly after birthing from his palms. About a half hour later, he collapsed in exhaustion with his back against a wall, chugging down a whole bottle of water.

"Save your strength, Ace, you'll need it for Anatoly's unarmed offense. You should be glad you came along now instead of earlier because he used to leave his students battered and bruised after every lesson." He paused, then added on jokingly, "Anatoly's training method is classified as its own form of torture in twenty-three nations."

"Oh shut up," Ace said, rolling his eyes. Yet, even so, he took the advice seriously, saving his strength as he gulped down more water, the cool liquid

soothing the bad taste in his throat only a little bit.

Chapter 5: Training

Sweat slid down Ace's neck and forehead, the boy wiping it from his brow with the back of his hand as he walked down the stairs. He was still high off the rush of excitement he got from learning he could control fire, and it showed in his jittering hands. Even though he'd been doing nothing but resting for the past ten or so minutes, he still felt exhausted. Using his Blessing had taken more out of him than he thought.

His gaze went to the middle of the floor, where a training mat had been placed, its faded yellow color against the dark brown of the wood flooring providing little contrast, especially in the soft lighting from the flickering lights of the lamps along the walls of the room.

Standing on the mat was Anatoly Ivanov, his Professor for unarmed combat. The middle-aged Russian man was adjusting his pants, dusting them off with his aged hands. He looked up upon hearing the creaking of the steps under Ace's feet, smiling at the boy, the wrinkles on his face showing much more prominence as he did.

"Ah, Ace. Have you come for your training?" he asked, his voice tinted with a Russian accent. Ace barely registered the question, his mind racing in all different directions from the day's revelations that he still hadn't gotten proper

time to process.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I am.” He took a heavy breath, trying to fill his empty lungs with air. He wiped the seemingly non-stop supply of sweat from his forehead again, wiping his hand off on his pants. “Let’s get started,” he said, eager to train despite his exertion. He stepped onto the training mat with Anatoly, the height difference much more prominent now with the shortened distance between them. Added on to his stoic features, it was safe to say Anatoly was an intimidating man.

“You have no combat experience, correct?” Anatoly asked, quirking a white-haired eyebrow upward quizzically.

“Yeah, I got nothing,” Ace said sheepishly, feeling a little embarrassed over his complete lack of fighting experience.

Anatoly nodded understandingly, silently reassuring Ace about his less than ideal skills before verbally reassuring him. “That is okay, many recruits have no experience, do not be embarrassed.” Anatoly put a hand on Ace’s shoulder, which was tiny under the Russian’s hold. “I will put you in a simulation for you to practice fighting a Spirit.”

Ace nodded along as Anatoly finished explaining. Anatoly went to the corner of the room where a VR headset was, taking it to Ace, who put it on. The view in the headset was a digital landscape, a blue grid in an infinite blackness revealing where the floor was. Orange numbers appeared in front of him, counting down from five. When it hit zero, a horn sound effect blared from the device, signalling the start of the simulation.

Spirits appeared in front of him, each one with skin of pixels. They were all more cartoony and technological than the ones he'd seen in real life, and they certainly didn't carry the same fear factor. "Practice punching them," Anatoly said, his face unseen but his voice clearly heard. Ace followed his instruction, doing his best punch towards the closest digital Spirit.

He knew it was a weak attack, he felt it in his arm, but the Spirit dissolved upon contact anyway. More Spirits appeared, and gradually, Ace felt like his attacks were getting better, each one packing more power than the previous. His confidence grew, and soon, he was completely surrounded by fake Spirits, throwing a multitude of punches into each and every one, all of them dissolving into pixels as two more took its place.

• • •

Anatoly watched as Ace, immersed in the digital world, threw punch after punch at the air, forgetting about the world around him and instead focusing on getting rid of the Spirits surrounding him. It was quite the sight, most of the recruits, with few exceptions, took days, even weeks, to learn how to throw a single proper punch. Meanwhile Ace was using a variety of attacks–jabs, uppercuts, even feinting for some reason–with proper technique and efficiency. Anatoly brought a hand up to his chin, rubbing the stubble as he studied Ace curiously.

There was no doubt about it in his mind.

The boy had potential.

• • •

Ace panted out heavy breath after heavy breath as he saw orange letters spelling out ‘GAME OVER’ in front of his face. He took off the headset, a sheen of sweat covering his entire body, especially his face. He wiped it off, looking over to Anatoly. “How did I do?” he asked.

“Good. Impressive, even,” Anatoly responded, nodding his head before continuing. “Though, natural talent, as useful as it is, will not be enough to get you to the top of the Shamanism Levels. Now, that is all we will have for today, go to RT-781 for your next lesson. You’ll need proper agility if you want to avoid Spirits and Rogues.”

“Rogues?” Ace asked as he sat down and chugged some more water, trying to catch his breath.

“Shamans who decided to desert the Shaman Society in favor of siding with the Spirits. Then again, most don’t live long, so you won’t have to worry about it.” Ace nodded, but he couldn’t help but feel a twisting feeling in his stomach at the idea of fighting against real human people. It didn’t sit right with him, but Anatoly’s words soothed the feeling a bit.

Ace laid back against the wall, feeling his muscles ache and groan from exhaustion. He took a few minutes to let his body build up some more strength for RT’s training. Eventually, he picked himself up off the floor and walked

downstairs to RT's floor, where he found the automata standing in the center of the room ominously.

As soon as he came within a few feet of the robot, it started up, its eyes flickering to life brightly. "I HAVE BEEN EXPECTING YOU, ACE HAWKINS, AND LOOK FORWARD TO TODAY'S LESSON," it said in a robotic voice, the gears beneath its exoskeleton whirring and turning as it moved and lived. Steam pushed past the crevices in the metal plates making up its skin, creating a sound similar to a train whistle.

"LET US BEGIN A BRIEF EPISODE OF AGILITY TRAINING," it said, raising its metallic fists in a readied position. Ace took a stance, as nervous as he was excited and exhausted. He didn't even have a moment to process the punch going straight for his face until it had already stopped, barely brushing his nose in the process.

He stumbled back, falling down backward on the ground with his heart racing in his chest. He was thankful that RT had stopped the punch right before it hit him, and he soon recovered from the shock and continued the lesson. It was more of the same, RT sending punches to Ace and stopping them right before they hit him.

At the end of the lesson, Ace wasn't looking forward to having RT-781 as his professor. Thankfully, RT told Ace that its lesson was the last one of the day, and that he could rest. With all that had been suddenly dumped on him that afternoon, he needed a moment to get some rest and try to understand everything.

Chapter 6: Demonstrations

Ace awoke the next morning with sore limbs and a crick in his neck. Despite the poorer condition of his body, he still showered in the bathroom of his dorm room and got ready for the day. He dreaded the training ahead of him, mostly because he had Heidi as a professor. He wasn't a judgemental person, but there was something about her that irked him. He couldn't put his finger on it; it was just a bad gut feeling.

He brushed it off, mentally shaking his head at himself as he left the dorm building and made his way to the Training Center. He gladly let the calm chilly winds blow past him, soothing his aching muscles. He entered the Training Center rather reluctantly, walking up the stairs and stopping on Heidi's floor, to find his professor standing there with a glare.

"You're late, *recruit,*" she said with a sneer, her already sharp eyes narrowing even more. If looks could kill, Ace would've been dead and buried. Ace looked down, mumbling a quick and quiet apology before stepping forward and standing right in front of the woman.

Ace risked looking up, but didn't dare glance at Heidi. Instead, he scanned the empty walls. The room had no personality to it, unlike RT's and Anatoly's,

just a bitter taste in the air and a feeling that made his guts twist into knots. Without even looking at Heidi, he knew she still had her glare trained on him.

He couldn't stop himself a moment longer, his eyes snapping up to Heidi's, the bright blue irises holding nothing but bad feelings for Ace. He gulped nervously, hoping the silent standoff would end soon so he could focus on the lesson instead. Much to Ace's relief, she cleared her throat and began to speak, thinly veiled disdain in her tone.

"We will begin training. You must protect brain and heart at all costs, even if it means sacrificing a limb, understood?" Ace nodded quickly, taking in her words and dedicating them to memory. "Then let us not waste time, we must begin," she said, turning back and walking a few paces before turning again and raising her fists.

He brought his arms up uselessly, earning yet another sharp look from Heidi. "Wrong. Like this," she moved her arms to a different stance, and Ace copied it as best as he could, Heidi showing no indication of it being better than the first. Her eyes scanned his body like she was inspecting him, then he realized why as she lunged forward and threw a punch at his defense.

• • •

Heidi would be stupid not to feel the air shift as Ace had entered the room. She hadn't seen what had happened with the other professors, but it wouldn't be a farfetched guess to say he demonstrated power beyond their expectations.

The question was, how beyond? Then again, it didn't matter in the end. What did matter was making sure he didn't get in the way. If Ace acted on this shift in the air–this *potential*–then the consequences would be dire for her and her plans.

She needed to stop him, that much was certain.

She knew exactly who could ensure it would happen. She also knew it would take time.

Then again, patience was a heavenly virtue.

• • •

Ace had been going through Heidi's training for some time, and his arms and stomach were bruised beyond anything he'd ever experienced before. It hurt to inhale too deeply, and Heidi had the gall to tell him to walk it off. He nursed his wounds, wincing as he put pressure on a particularly large bruise on his forearm.

Thankfully, he had William for his next lesson, which meant that he wouldn't get roughed up like he had in Heidi's. Once she dismissed him, he wasted no time getting up and walking towards the stairs, clutching his stomach in hopes it would lessen the pain.

As soon as he stepped foot into William's training floor, the atmosphere was replaced by an infinitely kinder one, as though the wood of the walls was

more forgiving. His eyes went to a metal cart off to the side, which held various kinds of weapons.

William was standing in the middle of the room, talking with Yujiro. The floorboards creaked under Ace's weight, alerting them to his presence. William turned, tossing Ace a warm smile as they made eye contact.

"Glad to see you survived Heidi's training, let's get started," he said, eyeing the visible bruises across his arms. He drew his silver sword, the same one he had used before revealing the existence of Shamans to Ace, something that happened only yesterday yet felt like it happened forever ago. "This is my weapon. All Shamans have some sort of physical weapon they use, often to harness their Blessing to its fullest extent," William explained, tracing the sharp edge of the blade with his finger.

"It's important to have something to fight with that isn't your Blessing. That way you can use both in conjunction or if your Blessing is rendered useless, you can do some damage," William said, gesturing to the cart. "As you can see, you have plenty to choose from–from the weapons of the ancient civilizations to modern day redesigns of them. Don't be afraid to pick something unique, you'd be surprised to learn that something unexpected can actually catch Spirits off guard."

Ace nodded, walking over to the cart and inspecting it closely. On it were weapons of all kinds, as well as some items that were not designed to be weapons of battle, such as a crowbar and a sickle. His eyes meticulously went over each and every weapon in the assortment.

None of them appealed to Ace.. That was, until his eyes fell on one leaning against the cart–a staff, embellished with an intricate design at the base and a topaz orb on the top. His eyes locked onto it, almost like the item was drawing him in.

Ace reached out and grabbed the handle of the staff. “You like that one?” William asked from behind him, still standing a few feet away with Yujiro.

“Yeah,” he said, then paused as he continued to look over the weapon in his group. “I do.” The topaz orb glowed almost golden under the lamplight, putting Ace in an almost trance like state. He couldn’t look away.

“That’s quite the weapon, Ace. I can’t say it's something I’ve seen used often, so props to you for that,” Yujiro said from behind William, flashing a supportive smile at the boy as he continued admiring the newly selected weapon in his hands.

“Ace, Yujiro and I are going to have a short fight to demonstrate the difference between our weapons, and how that difference is pivotal to understanding which is best for you,” William said, taking a few paces to go to the opposite side of the room as Yujiro, who had drawn his katana from the sheath around his waist.

“Don’t hold back, Yujiro, I want a *real* challenge,” William said to Yujiro, holding his sword in front of his waist. Yujiro grinned back at him, a playful glint in his eyes as he did.

“When have I ever held back?” he asked rhetorically. Without leaving a moment for an answer, he lunged forward with his katana in the air, thrusting it at William. The battle between the two boys flowed more like a dance; a swing,

a block, a counter, a block. It was mesmerizing to see, Ace studying their precise movements in the back-and-forth exchange.

Sparks flew wildly from their weapons as they collided and slid against each other, all of them creating a spectacle despite dying in the air moments later. Minutes passed by, the two of them locked in a clash of moving metals and limbs swiftly darting around in blurs.

William and Yujiro locked eyes while their blades locked in a hold in front of them. “You’re good,” Yujiro said, his face close to the other despite the distance created by their weapons.

“Flirting with me in front of my student? You’re evil, Yujiro Kaneko,” William responded playfully, before adding, “let’s finish this quick, all this fighting is building up an appetite.” William launched himself at Yujiro, who stepped back and fell to his back purposefully. William’s eyes widened as Yujiro struck his feet into his stomach and used his momentum to launch him across the room.

William landed against the wall with a vocal groan, rubbing his head and shaking out splinters from his hair. He muttered a curse under his breath as he rose, yet he still smiled goodheartedly at Yujiro before turning to Ace. “All right, Ace, we’ll continue our lesson tomorrow, you deserve a proper break. Now that you’ve had a basic lesson with all of your professors, Theodora might send you on a mission with our supervision as early as overmorrow, but don’t count on it.”

“Overmorrow?” Yujiro asked, his head going back slightly in confusion.

William glanced over at the boy. “Yeah, overmorrow–the day after tomorrow. It was the word of the day on my dictionary app,” William said with a nonchalant shrug.

“That’s stupid, just say the day after tomorrow,” Yujiro said back, sparking a debate between the two about the importance and use of overmorrow. Ace just rolled his eyes, leaving the building and letting the two bicker. He made his way across the base to his dorm room. Leaning his newly gifted staff against the wall and lying down, he felt the soft mattress on his bruises a welcome sensation.

Chapter 7: Learn and Exercise

It was hard to believe that a week had already passed since that day. At least, it was in Ace's mind. His bruises had mostly faded, scabs taking the place of cuts on his arm. He had been called into Theodora's office for an assessment of his skill, and possibly to be deemed worthy of an official level and permission to observe Yujiro and William's easier missions to get a feel of what Shamanism was outside of theory.

Ace made his way across the grounds of the Shaman Base, kicking up dirt as he walked before stopping in front of Theodora's office. The building still had a powerful aura behind it, but it was less intimidating and more reassuring now that he'd spent more time at the base. He slowly pushed open the door, stepping onto the wood-panel flooring and seeing all the Professors–including Theodora–in a semi-circular formation facing Ace.

"We have already done your evaluation, Ace, but you did come just in time for the voting. Come closer," Theodora beckoned Ace. He hesitantly stepped closer to the formation, noticing that RT-781 wasn't present.

Before he could say anything about it, Theodora answered the question forming in his mind. "RT-781 is not present today due to ongoing repairs, but a decision can be made without it," she said. "Now, we have all been brought here this afternoon to make the decision, based on an evaluation, whether or not

Ace Hawkins should become an official Shaman and be allowed to observe the missions of Yujiro Kaneko and William Baker.

"The vote will be majority rules, all those in favor, say 'aye.'" Theodora looked to the left and right as she spoke, all of the Professors–with the notable exception of Heidi–raising their hands and echoing Theodora's 'aye.' Ace, whose nerves were manifest in the form of a cold sweat, exhaled a sigh of relief he didn't realize he was holding. He felt his nervousness wash away like the tide receding on a beach.

"Very well. Ace Hawkins, you have been officially appointed as a Level C Shaman, meaning you will be under the guidance of William Baker and Yujiro Kaneko until you reach Level B or higher." Ace looked over at Yujiro and William, seeing the two boys smiling at him. He smiled back, especially when he saw Anatoly's stoic face twitch upwards in the ghost of a smile. Heidi still had a glare painting her features, but one bad apple didn't ruin the bunch.

"When am I gonna have my first mission?" Ace asked Theodora, as all the other Shamans except for Yujiro left her office.

"Today, I believe. Yujiro is having a mission not too long from now, so you can go on that one." Theodora gestured to Yujiro, who nodded in confirmation. "He'll go along with you so he can learn the ropes and get a positive example. Don't disappoint me, Yujiro." Yujiro gave a mock salute to Theodora, who narrowed her eyes a fraction before sending the two on their way.

Theodora shifted herself into an orb of light, ascending into the air as they shut the door behind them. "Alright, the Spirit is gonna be about ten minutes away, so that'll be enough time to give you some tips. Let's get going." Ace

nodded along with Yujiro, who led him to the door to leave the Shaman Base. Yujiro went through without a second's hesitation, but Ace fully stopped in his tracks.

He took a deep breath, the memory resurfacing of the nauseous travel through the disconnected door. He hesitantly grasped the doorknob, shutting his eyes as he twisted it and forced himself to step through it. It felt like his stomach was twisted into hundreds of knots before being untied on the other side. He stumbled, stepping in a puddle in the hallway of the abandoned apartment complex, but finding the traversal significantly less sickening than it was last time. Before, it had been like he was disassembled and re-put together somewhere else, but this time it felt more like he got a wave of nausea after going through a door. An improvement, but not by much.

He followed Yujiro, taking extra care to avoid the puddles of the dim dank building as he did. They both stepped outside the moss-blanketed building, gray clouds in the sky sprinkling rain down on them. Yujiro took a cluster of keys connected on a ring from his hoodie pocket, sifting through them until he got to a car key. He pressed on a button on the key, making a red car parked on the curb *beep* as it unlocked.

They both entered the car, Yujiro taking the leather seat behind the steering wheel while Ace took shotgun. The drive was silent, spare the soft *pitter patter* of rain against the windshield. Ace wasn't sure where Yujiro was driving, but he shoved the inkling of nervousness down in his stomach. Finally, once the uneventful drive had come to an end, Ace reached to get out of the car, only for Yujiro to stop him by grabbing his wrist.

“Before we fight the Spirit, I want to prick your finger really quick.”

Ace blinked, “I– What? Nevermind, just do it.” Yujiro nodded, reaching into a pocket of his jeans and removing a needle from it. He pricked Ace’s finger, taking the drawn blood on the needlepoint up to his mouth. He stuck his tongue out, sliding the needlepoint across as he licked and swallowed the crimson drop. Ace yanked his hand away, feeling queasy at the sight.

“My Blessing is Soul Copy,” Yujiro began to explain, unbuckling himself and fixing his hair in the rearview mirror, “which means I get to copy anyone’s Blessing by consuming as little as a single drop of their blood–well, any part of them, but a drop of blood is the best for me. Now that I’ve copied your Blessing, I can use it whenever I want, as well as all the other Blessings I’ve copied.” He opened the car door and exited, leaving Ace slack-jawed in the passenger seat. He soon snapped out of his semi-dazed state, scrambling out of the car to follow Yujiro, stepping out into a suburban neighborhood.

“Keep your eyes peeled and ears open. If Shaman scout reports are correct, then there should be a Fear Spirit somewhere around this area…” Before either of them could speak again, a voice boomed in the distance.

“GOOD MORNING CITIZENS OF AMERICA!” it said in the voice of an overly cheery and energetic announcer, though slightly distorted, as though the sound were playing through an old stereo. “ON TODAY’S FORECAST IS RAIN MADE OF THE BLOOD OF SHAMANS! ON ANOTHER NOTE, BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR THOSE *DIRTY* SHAMANS, AS SPIRIT KILLINGS HAVE REACHED AN ALL-TIME HIGH, WITH 46% BEING SLAIN WITHIN 48 HOURS OF BIRTH!”

Yujiro narrowed his eyes, knowing the voice belonged to the Spirit. He drew his katana, leaving Ace behind as he dashed to the corner, peeking around the house. Ace came up behind him, his eyes widening as he laid eyes on the Spirit standing in the middle of the street.

Its skin wasn't transparent like the other Spirits Ace had seen, it was a shade of albino white that was completely solid all over its body. The Spirit was tall–nearly eleven feet–and lanky, its fingertips reaching the tops of its knees. Just below its sunken manic eyes was the woofer of a speaker replacing its mouth, the mesh vibrating as it took ragged breaths.

"Fear Spirit of Public Speaking," Yujiro muttered under his breath, turning when Ace came up to his side. "This one is crazy powerful, you'd be surprised how many people are afraid of speaking publicly. All that fear is condensed into one being–*that*." Yujiro gestured to the Spirit, which twitched randomly as it stood, almost as if anticipating Yujiro to make a move.

Yujiro shifted in his crouched position behind the house, holding the grip of his katana tight enough to whiten his knuckles. His eyes watched the Spirit intently, scanning and patiently waiting for an opportunity to present itself to him. "I KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE SOMEWHERE, YOU DIRTY DIRTY SHAMAN!" The Spirit boomed, still copying the voice of a news anchor as it threatened the unseen Shaman.

Yujiro spotted his opportunity as the Spirit turned its back–its spine and ribs poking out from the tightly wrapped skin–, dashing to it at an incredible speed. He jumped into the air, reaching a height no normal human could reasonably achieve, an etching on his steel katana glowing green as he did. As

the green faded, another etching glowed a midnight purple, and the katana's blade covered itself in a layer of acid.

Yujiro slashed the katana, the acid and sword cutting straight through the Spirit's shoulder, severing it and leaving boils and burns behind. The Spirit wailed out, its voice shifting and mimicking others in a distorted horrifying sound of pain. It stumbled backward, tripping over itself and landing on a house, collapsing most of it.

Yujiro sprouted proportional dove wings from his shoulder blades, each and every feather a pearly white color. He ascended into the air, holding his katana with reverse grip, pointing the tip of the blade right to the Spirit's skull. He dove down, sinking the katana into the Spirit, drawing a monstrous scream of agony from it as it began to dissolve. It swung its arms wildly, destroying all remnants of the house that had survived.

Ace was about to congratulate Yujiro, but the words died in his throat when he spotted a silhouette of a figure in the distance. He was about to say something about it, but Yujiro cut him off. "Man, that was a workout. What do you say we stop by somewhere for lunch? I know I could go for a bite." Yujiro began walking to the car, and Ace felt he had lost his chance to bring up the mysterious person not so far away.

The two boys walked to Yujiro's car, Ace remaining silent as Yujiro talked about brunch options for them and possibly William if he wanted to tag along. His mind was elsewhere, wondering who the figure in the distance was. He brushed the thought away as they got into the seats of his red Toyota. They both buckled themselves in, Yujiro fixing his hair in the rearview mirror yet

again, only for his eyes to widen at the sight of the being standing directly in the rearview mirror, its form willingly unseen to anyone except Yujiro. It was a Spirit–seven feet tall, a long black cloak covering every inch of its form except for the head, a skull illuminated by two miniscule flames in the hollow eye sockets.

Yujiro' face paled, his hands going to the steering wheel and holding it tight enough to hurt the hands in his muscles. He didn't care. All that was going through his mind was fear, manifested in a singular frantic sentence repeated like a mantra in his head.

It's back.

Chapter 8: The Return

Yujiro held eye contact with the Spirit in the rearview mirror for a handful of seconds, a chill running down his spine, the skull of the spirit cracking as it smiled wickedly. Yujiro slammed his foot on the gas pedal, the wheels spinning momentarily before accelerating and launching the car forward at a speed way over the speed limit, the rubber tires screeching against the tar as it sped and swerved.

Ace clutched onto his seat tightly as Yujiro drove down empty streets, maintaining his speed all the way through, not daring to let up his foot even a little bit. The cold sweat that had formed on his palms made the leather of the steering wheel slippery as he maneuvered the car back to the Shaman Base.

Yujiro's face was as white as a ghost, his heart beating impossibly loud in his chest from the fear of the return of the Spirit. *That Spirit.* Ace's own fear spiked as the car swerved wildly, but not to the same level as Yujiro. Time didn't seem to pass the same way inside his mind, the image of the Spirit repeating itself over and over without pause.

His panic remained, even as Yujiro parked the car on the curb and stumbled his way into the apartment building, disregarding the puddles and damaged furniture as he walked through the *101* apartment door and entered the Shaman

Base. Ace followed closely behind, concern painted on his features as he saw the boy in the odd state.

Yujiro couldn't focus. He could barely even think. It was like his body was moving on autopilot, his mind lost and left behind in the car. His heart beat like a monotonous overpowering presence against his skull, his throat dry despite the cold fearful sweat covering his paled skin.

How is it back? It shouldn't be back. It's impossible for it to be back. Yujiro thought to himself, trying to make sense of the confusion that had no effect on Ace. He couldn't explain it to him, not in this state at least. That was the least of his concerns, however; his biggest concern was finding William.

His eyes were uncharacteristically frantic as he searched the inappropriately bright and sunny base, the cheerful air smothered by the horrible feeling in his chest. Just as he was about to give up his search, his eyes landed on William, who was talking with Anatoly. He rushed over, throwing his arms around him and hiding his face in his shirt, as if it would help him.

"Wh– Yujiro? What's wrong? Are you okay?" William half-asked and half-exclaimed, putting his arms around Yujiro in return. He steadied Yujiro, holding him so he wouldn't fall to the ground, something that, considering the situation, wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

Yujiro stayed close to William, not taking his face out of the other's shirt as he whispered his response, "It's back. Fear Spirit of Death. It's back, William." He could barely force himself to say the words, daring to look up just in time to see William's eyes widen in fear.

“Yujiro, you can’t be serious, Theodora *confirmed* with us that it was dead…” he mumbled more to himself than the other, just as Ace finally caught up, walking over to the pair. He started to speak, but Yujiro interrupted him with his response to William.

“I *am* serious, Will! I saw it with my own two eyes! I don’t know *how* it's back, it just *is*!” he exclaimed, distressed, bordering on hysterical now that he was basically shouting. William winced as the words left Yujiro’s mouth, taking a hand off of Yujiro’s back to nurture his own ear.

“What did he say the problem was? The Fear Spirit of Death?” Ace asked, his eyes darting between the two boys in unadulterated confusion.

William looked up from the Japanese boy and over to Ace. “Yujiro saw the Fear Spirit of Death, the undisputed most powerful Spirit to have ever existed. It’s said it can kill someone with as little as a single touch,” William paused, tentatively adding on, “Yujiro has a…” He trailed off, moving his hand in a circle as if searching for the right words. “Bad history, if you could call it that, with the Spirit.”

It was dark and stormy outside, rain relentlessly pounding against the glass of the window, thunder accompanying it after a flash of lightning. Yujiro had just been awakened from a horrible nightmare, and despite efforts to fall back asleep, he remained awake. With no other options, he clambered out of his dinosaur-patterned sheets. The soles of his feet touched the cold hardwood floor, and he jerked them back, groping in the darkness with his toes until he found his bunny slippers.

He slipped them on, the memory of him nearly throwing a tantrum for his mother to get them replaying in his mind before it faded into the background. His mind had other focuses. He walked over to the door of his bedroom, which was painted a soft pink color. He reached up to the brass doorknob, only to stop himself before he grabbed it.

He turned, grabbing a plush bunny off his bed, squeezing it against his chest for comfort before returning to the door and pushing it open with all his child-like might, letting the inky black darkness of the hallway seep into his room, drowning out the moonlight.

He waddled across the floorboards, his bunny slippers making squeaking noises as he stepped on the wood. He walked down the hall to his parents' bedroom, their door left ajar, an abnormal sight. He peeked inside timidly.

"Mommy?" Yujiro whispered into the dark, squinting to make out the shapes in the room before him. When his eyes finally adjusted to the lack of light, they widened in both terror and horror alike, the two emotions acting in a sickening conjunction as his emerald eyes laid on the scene.

The Fear Spirit of Death loomed over his parents' elevated bed, the flickers of red flame in the eye sockets of the Spirit giving just enough illumination to reveal his parents' pale, dead faces. The Spirit shushed him with a single bone finger to its skeletal jaw, disappearing into the night as a flash of lightning brightened the room. The brightness gave him just enough time to see his parents sprawled across their bed. A tear pricked the corner of his eye as a Shaman Mark took shape right over his heart.

The Fear Spirit of Death had killed Yujiro's parents when he was only six years old, traumatizing him for the rest of his days.

Yujiro began to hyperventilate, the traumatic memory flooding back into him. His heart pounded, his body trembled, his muscles felt useless, his eyes went blurry. It was like the entire world was collapsing around him. He was having a panic attack. William quickly realized what the problem was, holding Yujiro firmly by the shoulders and kneeling in front of him, forcing Yujiro to look at his face.

"Yujiro! Focus on my voice, take deep breaths–three seconds in, and three seconds out, okay?" he whispered to Yujiro, trying to convey the urgency while still keeping his voice calm and soothing. It was a tightrope, and William was doing his best to stay on it perfectly. Yujiro nodded in response, the buildings curving and taking on wicked forms in his peripheral vision.

Yujiro took breaths in and out, three seconds in and three seconds out, matching the pace William had set for him. Before long, he had calmed down, the world taking its normal shape again as his heart began to slow, his hands still trembling. His mind had gathered its bearings once more, but not before promising to torment Yujiro again once the opportunity presented itself. He clung onto William, both of them taking a moment to breathe.

Just as all the immediate problems had been resolved, Theodora stepped out of her office, checking on the commotion. She stepped onto the ground, her sandals keeping her pearly white toga from brushing against the dirt.

“Theodora! The Death Spirit is back!” William called out to Theodora once she was in earshot. Ace felt his fear increase tenfold when Theodora, the supposed most powerful Shaman alive, shivered at the words. Whispers spread through the crowd of surrounding Shaman like a wildfire in a forest of dry trees.

Ace felt goosebumps on his arms, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on edge, all from the thought of a Spirit embodying the Fear of Death–one that could kill any and every single person here with a touch of its finger.

Chapter 9: Making Frenemies

Some days had passed since Ace's mission with Yujiro, about four–but it was hard to tell with all the hours and days blending together in a monotonous routine. The days since the mission had been uneventful, with Ace resuming his lessons with his professors. The only main difference was the fact Yujiro was off duty, dealing with the sudden trigger of PTSD from seeing Death. Someone else had taken his place as professor for the time being, but he wasn't nearly as good as Yujiro.

Not only that, William had been less prevalent in his appearances outside of his lessons. It didn't take a genius to know that he was probably comforting Yujiro, as well as making sure he didn't have another panic attack. Thus, with both his supervisors out of commission, Ace concluded he wasn't going on a mission anytime soon.

Outside of his lessons, his days consisted solely of lazing around, eating, sleeping, and wandering around in hopes of finding something to do. The cycle was repetitive, and he was getting sick of it. He wanted something new, something to break the cycle, but he didn't get his hopes up.

It was an okay morning that day, the sun partially hidden behind light gray clouds drizzling a light rain on the Shaman Base. The clouds made a snake-like pattern, slithering across the blue sky in all their gray form, arrythmically

turning and winding. Ace had just finished training with Heidi, explaining the bruises all over his arms and stomach, and William–who was as distant as usual lately.

He was ready for a break, and thankfully, he knew just where to find one. Recently, a subsection had been added onto the dormitory building. A cafeteria. It looked vastly different than the dormitory building, however, sporting an alternating pattern of white and blue tiles. He went inside, grabbing a neon orange lunch tray and filling it with food–a small milk carton with a cow and text reading 'CHOCOLATE MILK,' a red apple, and a slice of pizza contained in a white box, which was already stained orange from grease.

He sat down at one of the tables in the corner of the room, opening his chocolate milk and pizza box, digging into the food. A girl his age sat across from him, and he didn't even look up from his food to see who it was. Recently, a handful of Shamans he didn't know had come up to him and made conversation, saying the Shaman Base had been pretty dry in recruits lately. He wasn't in the mood for talking though, just wishing she'd go away.

She didn't.

In fact, she snapped her fingers to get his attention, forcing him to look up and see who it was. He didn't recognize the girl, nor her sun-kissed skin, narrowed hazel eyes filled with harsh scrutiny, or her Shaman Mark–a patch of lighter skin right over the vein on the inside of her elbow. She had dark navy jeans, black boots, a cream-colored blouse, and a black jacket slung over her shoulders.

“I don’t know what your deal is, but you’ll *never* be as strong as me. *Never*,” she sneered, adding on a sharp glare for good measure, jabbing a finger at his chest, poking him.

Ace swallowed the bite of pizza in his mouth. “And who are you?” It was a genuine question on his end, but the way her face scrunched up, she must’ve interpreted it as an insult.

“*I*–” she put her hand on her chest, as she continued, “am Marisella Franco, someone you should be jealous of,” she said, rolling her ‘r’s and saying her name in a Spanish accent. She began boasting, looking down at Ace like he was inferior, “I am a Level X Shaman, which means I am one of the most powerful Shamans in the country.”

“You don’t know that. I could be a Level X Shaman someday,” he responded, more to himself than Marisella.

“That someday won’t be soon, if it’ll happen at all. I mean, did you see yourself in training with Heidi? She was *humiliating* you. It was pathetic, honestly.” She added on a mocking laugh before continuing. “Oh, why do I even bother wasting my breath, you aren’t worth my time. I only spend my presence on Shamans that’ll actually amount to something.” She got up from the table, strutting out of the cafeteria.

Ace was no stranger to the usual insult at school, mostly passersby dropping a harsh word or two in hopes of fitting in. However, this was different, mostly because it was his first time having a negative experience with another Shaman his age. Most of the others, in Ace’s experience, either kept to themselves or had varying degrees of friendliness.

Maybe it was just worrying, but he had a gut feeling he'd get more of the same treatment from Marisella in the near future.

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Ace was called into Theodora's office, a rare occasion as of late, his last appearance being when he was made into a Level C Shaman. He got up from bed in nothing but boxers, throwing on some clothes and a coat to shield him from the chilly weather, though it had been warming up recently.

He grabbed his staff before he left, more out of habit from going to his rigorous daily training, which was taking less and less of a toll on his energy everyday. Not only that, he felt himself getting stronger, and his new body showed a stark growth in his muscle structure.

He used his brass staff as a mock-walking stick as he made his way to Theodora's office, leaving his dorm and walking across the dirt in shoes he had scrambled to put on. His legs ached from RT's earlier agility training, but the pain took a backseat to curiosity.

He opened the door to her office, stepping onto the wood-paneled flooring. Orbs of light still levitated the air, as Ace had come to expect. They were like golden jellyfish, floating without rhyme or reason or care for size and placement. One large one descended from the air, shifting into Theodora, the old woman sitting tailor style on the floor.

“Ace, it’s good to see you again,” Theodora remarked as Ace stepped closer, leaving a few paces between them. “Though, as you may have inquired, I didn’t call you here to simply chat about our days. I know that your designated supervisors, Yujiro Kaneko and William Baker, are out of service due to personal reasons, but Spirits do not halt for pitiful human faults.

“Thus, we continue to need Shamans out and about exorcising Spirits, which is why I have decided to temporarily extend supervisor status to all Shamans who are Level X at this Shaman Base in particular. So, you will be sent to observe a mission with a different Level X Shaman.”

“Which one?” Ace asked, getting his hopes up. He hoped that the Shaman would be Anatoly or RT-781; he had taken a liking to them, but that was mostly because Heidi was the only professor he didn’t like.

“Her name is Marisella Franco.” Like a rollercoaster, all the hope in Ace dropped down in an instant, and he didn’t bother trying to hide it on his face. Of all the Level X Shamans at the base, it had to be *her*. Just his luck, his new frenemy, rival, whatever person was going to supervise him for the time being.

He could already picture what the mission was going to be like–insults, glares, and possibly even some more physical pestering. He could already tell this was going to be one of, if not the most, hated missions he would go on in his time as a Shaman.

He wished it would go quickly, but he was smart enough not to get his hopes up this time.

Chapter 10: Operation Spirit-killer

Beams of light came in through the window, shining on Ace's face, unpleasantly waking him up. Today was the day of his mission with Marisella as his supervisor, and he already dreaded it. Their introduction had been bitter, and he expected more of the same for the mission.

The sky was fairly bright outside, an inaccurate reflection of his current mood. A few clouds were in the sky, spread out unevenly in the otherwise blue sky. He threw on an assortment of random clothes, fixing his hair in the mirror in the bathroom before leaving the dormitory building, standing out in the cold air as he waited for Marisella to do the same.

Once he had been standing out there for a while, he checked his watch. It was ten minutes after Theodora had told him when they were supposed to meet. He wasn't usually an impatient person, but Marisella was already proving to bring out the worst in him. Finally, after another handful of minutes, Marisella emerged from the dorms, wearing an outfit as equally fashionable as the one she had worn in their last encounter.

"Let's go. And don't talk to me," she snapped her commands, walking right past him without so much as a second glance and heading to the door that led to the apartment complex, the frame having no walls around it.

Marisella pushed open the door, stepping through it into the apartment building. Ace hesitated a moment before following her, his stomach bubbling up in queasiness alongside a brush of dizziness before settling back down moments later. Lately, he had been affected less and less from traveling through the door, a fact for which he was very grateful.

Marisella continued down the forgotten building, the puddles of water moving aside for her, splitting and leaving dry ground under her feet before filling back in once her shoe left. *Water control,* he thought to himself. That must've been her Blessing. The irony of the fact that her Blessing was the complete opposite of his wasn't lost on him.

Eventually, the two of them arrived at a city block not far from the Shaman Base, the buildings having endured heavy damage. No doubt the work of a Spirit. "Nothing low-level could have done this much in so little time," Marisella observed, Ace thankful that the words leaving her mouth weren't a jab at him or something adjacent to that. "This is definitely a Fear Spirit, and at *least* a Level A. Not that it matters, I could single handedly kill any Spirit, even that Fear Spirit of Death Yujiro was wimping over."

Ace clenched his fists, a surge of anger pulsating through his body at Marisella's disrespect to Yujiro–someone he considered a pure and kind soul–especially since it related to his trauma. He didn't think he could hate the girl any more than he already did.

The pair turned the corner, coming face-to-face with a Spirit in the shape of a panther. Its skin was made of glass, unlabeled black lines indicating a measurement spread along its glass form, stopping only at the edges of its body.

A mysterious vibrant green liquid sloshed around in its legs and belly, as well as the tip of its tail, which was shaped into a syringe. It snarled at him and Marisella, baring its teeth–needles, just like its tail.

Fear Spirit of Needles. He didn't need to dedicate a second thought to wondering what it was.

Ace spared a glance away from the horrifying Spirit to look at Marisella. To his surprise, the girl looked petrified, her face frozen in an expression of fright with her irises twitching around with minuscules of increments in the white of her eye, like it was trembling from fear. Continuing his scrutiny, he realized the girl was completely immobilized from fear alone, and the prolonged absence of his gaze allowed the Spirit to send the tip of its needlepoint tail straight towards her chest, aiming directly at her heart.

Marisella was scared to open the door. She was standing outside apartment 214, the room where she and her mother lived. Though living wasn't the best descriptor of their situation. She tightened the hold on the straps of her backpack, a lump forming in her throat as she fidgeted in place. She'd give anything not to go inside, but she had to… it was her mother, after all. She reached down ever so slightly, taking hold of the door handle and twisting it, stepping inside the room.

The first smell that invaded her nostrils was that of cigarette smoke, her nose scrunching up almost at second nature at this point. She coughed into her closed fist. She never got used to the putrid smell, not even after eleven years of

stomaching it. It was a horrible smell. She tried to sneak past the living room, hoping her mother hadn't heard her cough and wouldn't know she was here.

"Be a good girl and get me s'more of that good stuff, will ya, honey?" her mother asked. Marisella wasn't an idiot, she knew her mother was talking about her heroin supply, the drug she'd been addicted to for as long as she could remember. She stopped in her tracks, muttering curses under her breath a girl her age definitely wasn't supposed to know. She reluctantly turned around, making her way to her mother's bedroom, avoiding trash and the ashtrays her mother never used. The living room carpet was an ashtray to her, the beautiful cream color stained gray over years of the mistreatment.

She stepped inside her mother's bedroom, mostly unused except for stashing drugs. Her mom fell asleep on the couch most days. She lived on the couch, surviving off Marisella's dead grandmother's social security. It was fraud, but Marisella bit her tongue. It was the only way money came into the house after all, even if most of it was wasted on drugs and cigarettes. She sifted through her mother's bedside cabinet, looking for the supplies for her mother's addiction. She narrowed her eyes, then they widened in fear as she realized that not a drop of it was there. She frantically pushed needles and empty bottles aside, muttering under her breath at each lost second without finding anything.

This was bad. Very bad.

She hesitantly rose off the floor, walking back into the living room empty handed. After an uncomfortably long silence, she spoke, her voice wavering as it passed her lips. "You–" the words caught in her throat, fear lodging them there. She forced them out anyway. "You've run out, Mom." Like a light switch,

her mother became enraged, rising from her lying position on the cushions and grabbing the eleven-year-old girl by her throat, choking her.

"You did this! You damn brat! You're hiding it, aren't you?! Don't you know that stuff is good for Mommy?! You wouldn't want Mommy sad, would you? Would you!?" She continued to choke Marisella, shaking her violently after lifting her up an inch off the ground. Marisella clawed at her mother's hands, gasping for air, unaware that a Shaman Mark was forming on her inner elbow, exactly where a heroin needle would be injected.

Her mother suddenly let go of Marisella upon hearing the sound of police sirens coming closer.

Marisella was finally liberated.

Ace slammed down his staff, the brass bottom connecting with the concrete and summoning a bolt of fire in front of the tail, melting it inches before it reached its target of Marisella's heart, which was beating what felt like a mile a minute in the chest of the paralyzed girl. The Spirit roared in pain, an animalistic and unearthly sound mixed with the shattering of glass.

Ace continued his face-off with the Spirit, standing in front of Marisella to protect her. He may have loathed her, but no one deserved to die just because of petty insults and annoyance. The panther walked in a circle around Ace and Marisella, Ace adjusting his position accordingly while it continued looking at him with glowing green eyes, staring at him like he was a meal in the making.

The Spirit lunged, a mistake on its end. Ace pointed the orb of his staff directly at it, sending an inferno of flames straight towards it, engulfing it in red

and orange fire. He didn't relent, pushing more of his energy into concentrating on the flames, melting more and more of the Spirit in a gruesome display of power. Humans didn't deserve to die, but he had no problem killing beings whose entire existence was based on and created from the torment of innocent people.

His face was illuminated by the spectacle, the sound of pure unfiltered pain echoing from the Spirit drowned out by the crackling of the flames. Ace only stopped the fire when he was absolutely sure the Spirit was dead, and even then he let it crackle on for a moment longer before willing the dancing wall of heat to die down, the crackles turning into murmurs turning into whispers turning into sparks turning into ash.

He breathed a sigh of relief, the staff slipping out of his hand as his legs nearly gave out under him. He fell on the ground, resting on his back while his body ached like it never had before.

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Marisella barely registered what she was seeing, mostly because she was lost in her own mind with memories of her mother and her addiction. The little she did process in her petrified mind, however, told her one thing. Ace was powerful, more powerful than he should've been for his rank.

He had potential, a fact she wouldn't admit, no matter the lengths he went to get her to say it, nor however much power he used that potential to obtain.

One thing was for certain, though. Ace had the potential to become leagues stronger than she.

That made her feel weak.

She hated feeling weak.

Chapter 11: (In)sight

The walk back to the apartment complex was flooded with an awkward silence, and Marisella and Ace were drowning in it. After the longest few minutes of their lives, Marisella broke the silence. “Don’t you *dare* tell anyone about… *that*,” she said, her vulnerability poorly masked under a disguise of sternness. Ace’s mind compared it to a chick in its shell, the hard egg protecting the sensitivity underneath.

“I wasn’t going to, promise,” Ace responded, shoving one hand into his pocket while the other continued holding the staff. Marisella’s shoulders untensed a fraction at the honesty in his voice, her mask cracking ever so slightly. After a moment’s hesitation, he continued, “If you don’t mind me asking–” *God, that was stupid to say, of course she would mind me asking. Too late to take it back, though.* “–why are you so afraid of needles? And um… is it why you have a Shaman Mark on your inner elbow?”

Obvious discomfort pulsed through Marisella, though she responded to him anyway. “No one’s born a Shaman, but anyone can *become* one at any point in their life. Shaman Marks show up after an emotionally traumatic event–not just any traumatic event, one that’s *life altering*–and they have a tendency to show up somewhere related to the event. It’s said the Gods feel pity for you, so they give you a Blessing and Shaman Mark as compensation.”

Ace nodded along as she spoke, making mental notes of it all. “And how does that tie into your fear of needles?” he asked, knowing he was probably overstepping a boundary by asking, but he couldn’t help himself.

Marisella crossed her arms in front of her chest, clutching at her elbows in an attempt to distract herself from the rotten memories of her past. “My mom got into drugs. Strong ones. Bad ones.” She paused, unsure why she was sharing the weighted topic with him. She picked at the information in her mind, deciding against including any more. “Never mind, I’d rather not get into the details. The gist of it is that I got my Shaman Mark.”

“Right,” Ace replied awkwardly, trailing off before he could include another word. He tried to apologize, but the words died in his throat. He knew what he wanted to say, and he knew he should say it, but his mouth wouldn’t let him. Thus, the only words between them were their wordless footsteps and near-silent breathing.

Only, Marisella heard three pairs of footsteps. Hers, Ace’s, and another’s. She turned her head, looking over her shoulder and seeing a man in the near distance. He was around six feet tall, sporting a light brown trench coat, a hoodie covering his face, and hiking boots, the soles of which were a muddy red color. Her eyes then went to his hand, fear jolting her nerves when she saw a knife clasped in a leather glove. The man looked up, making eye contact with her, his skin was as black as night, with perfectly pearly white teeth and eyes crimson like spilt blood.

He wasn’t a he, he was an *it*. And that it was the Fear Spirit of Stalkers.

“Run!” Marisella shouted, adrenaline fueling her. Ace glanced back for only a moment, his gaze lasting on the Spirit long enough to see it pull its kitchen knife above its head. He began running alongside Marisella, their hearts racing almost as fast as their legs were pumping.

The pair ran as fast as their bodies could take them, fear overshadowing logic as it told them to take flight instead of fight. Slowly but surely, the Spirit caught up to them, its body not tiring from exhaustion or weakened by human faults. It brought the knife up higher, its white smile glimmering in the morning light as the metal blade sunk into Ace’s shoulder, the leather gloved hand twisting the handle side to side.

Ace screamed in pain, the sound echoing down the street of buildings. Closely following was the sound of the Spirit letting out a scream of horror as its body began being stretched and bent beyond its limits, the sounds of cracking and breaking coming from every joint in its body. It began turning into gas, its form being absorbed into a talisman taking the form of a metal ball the size of a marble. It was Anatoly’s Blessing–Imprisonment–being able to trap Spirits in talismans in which they would be exorcised after a set amount of time.

The talisman, which had been split in half to absorb the Spirit, closed behind it seamlessly, as if it had never been separated in the first place. The owner of the Talisman came into view, wearing a tracksuit just like the one he wore in Ace’s training, the collar of which covered the large Shaman Mark plastered across his throat.

Anatoly was in his cabin in Moscow, Russia, along with his older brother and father, the wooden walls sheltering the three from the relentless blizzard raging on outside. Anatoly was far from the best kid–making mischief, being a bit of a jerk to his classmates–but unlike his brother, Dmitri, he hid his schemes behind a golden child persona for his father.

Anatoly had stolen money from his father's wallet earlier that afternoon, intending to buy himself some candies and sweets, though his plan was cut short after being locked inside by the blizzard. His father hadn't noticed the missing bills until now.

But his discovery was made clear when he yelled from across the cabin, garnering both boys' attention. "Mitya! Anatoly! Who stole from my wallet!?" his father shouted in furious Russian. Mitya was his brother's nickname, and his father always used it, even when he was angry or disappointed in Dmitri.

Anatoly, the fearful young boy he was, didn't want to bear his father's wrath, a feeling shared by his brother. He didn't even realize he had pointed an accusatory finger at Dmitri until his brother looked at him, his expression a mixture of shock and betrayal. They both knew Anatoly had stolen the money, and that fact only made Dmitri's heart shatter more.

Dmitri turned to look at their father, his expression showing his fury. "Dad, wait! It wasn't me, it was Anatoly, I swear!" Dmitri exclaimed to their father. The man didn't believe his son, whom he knew was a troublemaker, for a single second. He slapped him across the face, making Dmitri stumble and clutch his cheek, which throbbed in pain.

"I should've known it was you, Mitya. You're always getting into trouble, no matter what I say, it's in one ear and out the other with you. Why can't you be more like Anatoly?" Dmitri opened his mouth to say something, but his father held up his hand, shutting him up. "You know what? Get out of my house, Dmitri*, no son of mine is gonna steal from my wallet and lie to my face about it." He pointed to the door, his rage reaching its boiling point.*

"Dad, you can't be serious!" Dmitri exclaimed in response, feeling an unfamiliar stab in his heart from the absence of his nickname in his father's address to him. "I can't survive out in a blizzard like that, I'll freeze to death in minutes! Please, just please believe me!" He begged for his father's understanding, knowing the man was far too emotional to make a rational decision.

"You should've thought of that before you stole from me, thief! Out!" his father yelled, his voice leaving no room for objection or rebuttal. Dmitri was speechless, their father had his fits of anger, but never to a point even half as much as this. Something felt wrong about it, but there was no chance of pointing that out.

He hesitated, words dying before they even had a chance to take shape. He gave one last glance to Anatoly, who couldn't bear to look up from the floorboards out of shame and guilt. He let out a quiet scoff, his usual lighthearted and playful demeanor gone in the wind. He clenched his fists, looking ready to punch his younger brother right then and there.

He didn't, though. Instead he just turned and left the cabin, the blizzard engulfing him in seconds, his figure gone in the endless white wall of snow.

Anatoly felt guilt and regret overwhelm his mind, the emotions increasing tenfold as his father slammed the door shut behind his older brother, locking it. He felt like the worst human being on Earth. He had betrayed his brother, and for what?

Nothing. He had gained nothing but lost everything. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes, his father giving him a light slap on the shoulder as he said "boys don't cry, you should know that by now, Anatoly." Neither of them noticed the shift in the skin tone of his throat as a Shaman Mark the shape and size of a butterfly created itself there–Dmitri's favorite animal.

How ironic life could be sometimes.

Chapter 12: Close Calls

“I’m sorry I didn’t get here earlier,” Anatoly said while slipping the talisman containing the newly captured Spirit onto a bracelet of identical metal balls. The three of them had begun walking back to the Shaman Base together, Anatoly checking the surroundings like a hawk, though no more Spirits disturbed them for the time being.

Marisella had one hand facing towards the wound on Ace’s shoulder, clotting the visible blood to prevent it from bleeding anymore and staining his ripped shirt. Ace winced as he moved his hurt arm, shakily and slowly shifting it back to a more comfortable position.

“We’re just glad you came when you did. We would’ve been dead meat without you coming in,” Marisella said, most of her focus still dedicated to keeping Ace’s wound from bleeding more. Marisella’s ability to stop blood flow confirmed her abilities to him. She could control water or liquids in general.

Anatoly nodded, but both of them could still see the guilt shaping his features. Despite his guilt and guardedness, his footsteps gave off a feeling of confidence, especially as he led the other two forward, guiding them back to the Shaman Base–the route to which he had memorized after years of being a part of the Shaman Society.

After the exchange of words, the group fell silent, continuing that silence until they had reached the apartment complex. The moss had grown a tad since Ace had first started Shamanism, but it wasn't noticeable in the grand scheme of things, acting more as a silent indicator of time and growth.

Anatoly led them inside the building, opening door *'101'* and letting the other two enter first before going in behind them, shutting the door. The nausea felt worse on Ace this time, making his injury pulsate with discomforting pain and his stomach fill with an uneasy sensation, like seasickness.

Thankfully, there was a pleasant breeze in the Shaman Base, which Ace breathed in greedily, the air calming down his stomach yet also reminding him of the gape in his muscles at his shoulder blade. The eyes of some of the Shamans present were on them, especially the hurt Ace–their expressions a mix of concern and pity.

They passed Yujiro and William as they walked, Yujiro leaning on William with his eyes closed, his face showing both contentment and pensive worry, while William kept him close via a caring arm around his torso.

"William," Anatoly began, his voice stern, his eyes not even bothering to look at either boy as he spoke. "Stop coddling your boyfriend in front of the kids, you're setting a bad example."

Yujiro either didn't hear Anatoly or didn't care; meanwhile William rolled his eyes before responding in a matter-of-fact tone. "Ace and Marisella are both my age, I'm sure they can stomach the sickly sweet sight of me pampering my wonderful boyfriend." Yujiro showed an inkling of a reaction, a soft hum in response.

“Just make sure your job comes first. Being a Shaman is your top priority; everything else takes a backseat. Besides, it *is* superstitious for Shamans to love, after all,” Anatoly replied with a dismissive wave of his hand, ending the short conversation then and there.

Once they were out of earshot of Yujiro and William, Ace asked the question itching in his brain. “Why is it superstitious for Shamans to love?” Anatoly looked back at him when he asked this, and he debated something over in his mind before deciding to tell him.

“I’m sure Theodora has neglected to mention this to you, since she’s aware of the need for Shamans, but no Shaman in recorded history–with the sole exception of Theodora–has ever lived past sixty years old. Not a single one. All of them have died in service too; even the few who have retired all died to Spirits or had Spirit-related deaths,” Anatoly explained, a hint of melancholy creeping into his voice at the grim statistic.

Ace blinked, speechless from surprise. It shocked him to no end to learn that no Shaman had lived longer than Theodora. He wouldn’t have believed it if he hadn’t observed some of the missions he’d been on. From what little portion of Shamanism he’d experienced, he knew it was taxing on both the mind and body. Fighting horrors almost beyond human imagination as often as he did could drive someone insane.

“I’m going back to my dorm. Killing that Spirit took a lot out of me,” Marisella said suddenly, leaving the two guys behind and heading towards the Dormitory Building. She was lying through her teeth; she’d been paralyzed the

entire fight, but he didn't bring it up. There was no need to. She'd probably need time to recover from the shock of the bad memories coming back to her.

Anatoly let her leave, but not before reaching into the pockets of his pants and removing a roll of gauze, bandaging Ace's wound up tightly. As he did, he mentioned how Theodora was sending many of the Shamans out to be scouts whenever they had free time, searching far and wide for the Fear Spirit of Death that Yujiro had seen on his mission with him.

They continued onwards to Theodora's office without her. The smell of trees filled Ace's nostrils as he walked with Anatoly, kicking up dust and wishing he could get the day over with and hoping that Marisella leaving them for the dorms would be the final distraction of the day.

So, of course, there was another distraction. Just his luck.

Heidi was murmuring words to herself that Ace couldn't hear while she sat on the ground right next to Theodora's office, RT-781 sitting in front of her with its lightbulb eyes flickering wildly. She had an assortment of tools next to her–a wrench, two screwdrivers, and a pile of diligently sorted screws and bolts–while she held a flashlight between her teeth, sending jolts of electricity into the open back of the automata, the panel which would normally protect its inner workings set off to the side.

"WARNING! WARNING! ATTEMPT AT UNAUTHORIZED ENTERING OF MAINFRAME WITH POSSIBLE MALICIOUS INTENT! PLEASE REMOVE UNAUTHORIZED USER!" RT exclaimed robotically, its voice going up and down and glitching and bugging out with the same unpredictability as its flickering eyes, its metallic limbs jolting and twitching.

“Yes, yes, we know. That is the problem, there is no malicious intent. Damn hunk of junk,” Heidi replied to the robot, her words easily misinterpretable from the flashlight lodged in her mouth. She screwed something tighter, fixing what was apparently the false alarm going through the robot’s motherboard.

Ace’s instincts told him to stay behind, told him that something was wrong, told him that it wasn’t as it seemed, told him that this was a trick that he shouldn’t fall for. He didn’t believe them, but his body believed them enough to make him stop and look at Heidi and RT for a moment. Nothing looked wrong, but his heart was pounding as though he was in a life or death scenario.

He only brought his attention back to Anatoly when Heidi looked up from the wiring of RT to send a glare Ace’s way; her sharp eyes sparkling like shining sapphires sending a shiver through his spine. He realized Anatoly had walked away without him, and he shambled over to catch up, the wound on his shoulder leaving a trail in the form of blood drops behind him.

They both entered the office, Theodora already sitting cross-legged on the paneled flooring. Theodora beckoned for Ace to come close, which he did. She inspected his wound, scrutinizing and scrupulously noting every detail of not only the wound, but also of Anatoly’s bandaging. After a quiet moment of her looking over the stab, she nodded.

“You’ll be on hiatus from your Shamanism until this heals. That’s non-negotiable,” she said, waving a hand in indication for them to both leave. Ace sensed another pair of ears listening in on the conversation, but after what

his instincts had told him with Heidi, he didn't trust them one bit. He ignored the feeling, focusing on Theodora.

"Can't Yujiro, I dunno, use a healing Blessing or something?" he asked.

"He's still recovering. Besides, you've gone eighteen years healing the normal way, you can spend another week or so doing it."

Ace grumbled, but reluctantly accepted it, as Anatoly rebandaged the wound and sent Ace along his way to his dorm.

• • •

It watched Ace return to the dormitory building, unable to stop a grin from growing on its face at the obliviousness of the people surrounding it. Once it was sure all eyes were off of it, it rose, striding over to the trail of blood the boy had left, the drops leading straight to Theodora's office. It knelt over, probably looking to any passerby that it was inspecting it.

It wasn't.

It picked up the drop via the tip of its finger, unbothered by the dirt and dust that came along with it. Without hesitation, it stuck its finger in its mouth, the blood on its tongue tasting better than any vile human food it had ever wasted its breath eating.

It savored the flavor, recounting the conversation that it overheard. Ace would be out of commission for a little while, which meant he would be set back on his training, halting him in his tracks. Setbacks for Ace and the

Shamans meant more time for it and its allies. It was like a blessing from the gods. It almost felt like laughing, but no, that time would come.

For now, it would wait.

Its ally would do the work, its job for now was simply idle waiting.

Chapter 13: Recovery

Ace was bored out of his mind. Theodora's order for him to not go out for any more missions until his injury had healed had resulted in him laying around in his bed all day, waiting for the moment when Theodora could deem him ready to go out again.

He moved slightly on the mattress, messing up the pearly white bundle of sheets he had draped over his sprawled out self, the covers partially slipping and falling to the side of the bed. The past few days had been the same thing repeated nearly exactly–wake up, eat, survive boredom, sleep, wake up again–the monotonous routine taking a toll on him.

He looked to the side, seeing the analog clock set up on his desk across the room, the black metal hands subtly moving as they pointed at equally spaced roman numerals indicating it was *11:24*. There would still be a good amount of time before the cafeteria opened, which meant that he was going to be staying in his bed for the time being.

He reached behind him, touching the scar that had formed in place of the wound on his back. It wasn't painful anymore, but it still felt weird to the touch, like the skin wasn't his own. He felt good enough to get back on his feet right now, but he knew Theodora would make him wait until tomorrow, just to be safe.

Ace closed his eyes, wishing he could fall asleep again so he could sleep the day away. It was better than just sitting around in boredom. Hopefully he'd wake up after the cafeteria opened–12:15 on the dot, not a minute later. Just as he closed his eyes, he heard a knock on the door, his eyebrows furrowing in irritation when the sound reached his ears.

Without waiting for a response, the owner of the knock opened the door, revealing himself to be William. As he stepped further into the room, Ace finally opened his eyes and sat up on the bed. "A little birdie told me you were feeling lonely, so I came to fix that," William said, sitting down on the edge of Ace's bed.

"Well, make sure to thank that bird for me, because I haven't felt this bored in forever," Ace responded, moving his legs and getting more comfortable in his upright position. The two started talking about random things, a lot of it resulting in them reminiscing on their friendship. Eventually, though, the conversation diverted to anything interesting going on with William.

"There's been a huge surge of Spirits recently, especially in more densely populated areas," William said once the topic was brought up. "The whole thing's just crazy. Over a third of the total registered Shamans are out scouting. Apparently, we haven't even *had* scouts since the First Coming of Spirits back in Theoodra's early days."

"What's that?" Ace asked William just as Yujiro walked into the room, the boy looking significantly better and more functional, though he still didn't look completely like himself. Yujiro sat down right next to William, resting his head

on his shoulder and closing his eyes, the bags under them more visible in the sunlight peeking through the window.

"Well, the…" William started, but trailed off as Yujiro sat down next to him. "You know what," he said instead, Ace nodding. Yujiro was probably still sensitive to all the Fear Spirit of Death talk, and an unspoken taboo about saying its name had fallen over the Shaman Base. "Anyway, *that* was still alive, and Theodora was an active Shaman. It basically revived all the killed Spirits at once, and apparently, something happened where she wasn't ever the same.

"But, whatever happened, it was traumatic. You see, Theodora experienced a Second Awakening, it's like a normal awakening, but it can only happen *after* you've already gotten your Shaman Mark. There's a lot of uncertainty surrounding it, but Theodora's Blessing–Celestialism–is a Second Awakening Blessing, which makes it more powerful than any other tenfold."

Theodora stood out in lush green hills with her husband. The Spirit in front of them had just finished dissolving, turning to dust after the pair had killed it, their Blessings and weapons used in conjunction perfectly. Theodora would stick to the back, whittling the Spirit down while her husband took its attention, getting up close and personal with it.

They were inseparable.

"You did great out there, honey," her husband said, putting his arm around her shoulder before kissing her cheek. Theodora smiled fondly back at the man, shifting to be closer to him. Life felt perfect for the two of them, like it was a dream, like it had a rose tint to it. Nothing could ruin it…

Nothing except for the horrifying screech in the distance, the sound making the hairs on both of their necks stand on end. On instinct, they both looked back, seeing the creature–the monster–that created such a horrific noise. A shiver went up Theodora's spine as her eyes widened when she realized what it was.

The Fear Spirit of Death.

She'd heard legends of it, cautionary tales, rumors and murmurs of its speculated existence, folklore that made it seem more far fetched than reality would dictate. She'd assumed it was just that–fake, a story to keep rebellious Shamans in line–but no, she was wrong. It was here.

It stood on the top of a hill, black cloak standing out like a black sheep compared to the vibrant green grass and bright blue sky surrounding it. The grass at its feet shriveled up and withered, turning a sickly mix of yellow and brown. It raised a skeletal hand, as if beckoning for someone–something.

They quickly realized what *it beckoned when an army of Spirits emerged from the horizon behind it, hundreds of black dots along the sky. Their bodies blended together, making a wall of darkness that covered the area behind the Fear Spirit of Death. Fear rippled through both Theodora and her husband.*

"Run, Theodora! I can handle them, go!"

"But–"

"Just go! Please!"

Theodora hesitated, wasting precious seconds, before doing as her husband told, turning and making a run for it. As she ran, the Spirits came closer and closer to her husband, surrounding him in barely a blink of an eye.

Nevertheless, she kept running, she kept running as the scream of her husband came as he was torn apart and killed by the Spirits.

Tears flooded her eyes, and her entire body felt weak. She barely managed to keep running while a Shaman Mark–a second one–formed right where her love had just kissed her. She collapsed on the ground, sobbing into her hands. Then, she screamed as well.

A Second Awakening.

Ace blinked a few times as he awoke from his nap, having fallen asleep after Yujiro and William left–which they did after Wiliam told him the story of the First Coming of Spirits, and how it had killed a majority of the Shaman population at the time. He glanced at the clock again, the face showing 12:13. Despite his initial boredom, the time had flown by.

With nothing else to do, he rose from his bed, still in his pajamas. He made his way out of the Dormitory Building and to the cafeteria. He ignored everything and everyone, getting into the lunch line and getting his food on a tray like he had a few days earlier.

He sat down at an empty table, looking up from his food to see Marisella glaring daggers at him, crushing the juice box in her hand before scowling at it; then with a movement of her hand, the spilt juice reversed into the juice box again, filling it back up effortlessly.

He couldn't focus on his food, his mind preoccupied with going on another mission, even more so with the information William had given him. More

Spirits were on the loose, more people were scouting instead of exterminating the Spirits, and more people were getting hurt because of it.

His moral code wouldn't allow it, he was going to take action and fight against the Spirits. He could feel the determination burning within him, a feeling he hadn't felt since his enrollment.

Chapter 14: Museum Trip

Finally. That was Ace's first thought when Theodora told him in her office that his hiatus was being ended and he'd be allowed to go on another mission. The news was good enough to almost overshadow the fact that Marisella would be supervising him. Almost.

Ace stood by the exit to the Shaman Base, tapping his foot impatiently while he waited for Marisella. He held his staff at his side, the metal having taken some scratches and visible wear even in its little use over his recovery days. The day was warm, flowers blooming at the edges of the man-made dirt paths between the buildings at the base.

He was brought back to reality by Marisella, her footsteps crunching in the dirt catching his attention. He looked up, seeing her scowl directed at him. She didn't say a word to him, only opening the door to leave and not waiting for him to follow her. She stepped through, purposefully trying to close the door behind her, causing Ace to stop it with his hand so he could walk through as well.

He glared at her from behind as they both walked through the apartment complex and out onto the street. The two walked in silence, Marisella taking the lead. Despite having grown up his entire life here, Ace couldn't say he

knew where anything was, with the exception of how to get to his high school and middle school from the orphanage.

He'd spent most of his time inside–a byproduct of his solitude–and thus, never bothered to learn the streets he wandered day after day. Now that was even more so the case with his infrequent leaves from the Shaman Base. So, it was no surprise when he didn't recognize the street Marisella took him down. He didn't even have a vague understanding of what was on this street. He couldn't recall ever seeing the name of it.

Their walk continued, only to be abruptly stopped when Ace, lost in thought, nearly bumped into Marisella, who announced, "We're here." He looked up, seeing her staring at one building in particular. Curious, he shifted his gaze to what she was looking at, raising an eyebrow in confusion.

"A wax figure museum?" he asked. In front of the pair of Shamans was a rundown building with a giant, worn sign on the top reading, "Wendell's Wonderful Wax Museum."

"An unsuccessful one. Turns out people aren't big fans of horrifying looking wax figures," Marisella responded, her first words to him since the day of their previous mission. She stepped forward, taking the *Grand Opening!* Banner between her hands before looking up at the glass door, seeing the *BANKRUPT* paper attached to it.

She ignored both of them, turning the unlocked handle and stepping inside the museum. Ace was quick to follow, summoning a flame in his hand, illuminating a giant wax statue of George Washington, his face horribly misshapen, making him look more monstrous than human.

“No wonder the place went out of business,” he murmured to himself, getting a closer look at the figure. With the exception of its face, it had remarkably good handiwork, and the anatomy was respectable, though the glaring disfigurement was impossible to gloss over. “Any idea what this Spirit could be?”

“Dunno. This place is massive though. Splitting up could get me away from you in both the short and long term, so let’s do that. You in?” she asked, but interrupted Ace when he opened his mouth to respond. “Don’t care, we’re doing it. I’ll take the right half of the building, you go left. Scream like a girl if you see the Spirit so I can go and save you like the helpless idiot you are.”

“You sure? Something feels off about the statue to me,” Ace responded, making Marisella stop, already halfway down the hallway to the right. She turned around, looking at the seven foot tall statue of George Washington. She then slowly looked over to him, doing a once over of him like he was a crazy person.

“Ace, it’s made of *wax.* This isn’t a horror movie. A Spirit can’t possess objects. I mean, if you’re a wuss, you could just say that. I would say ‘no shame,’ but there’s definitely shame. Anyway, if you’re going to suck on your thumb and jump at every corner while we’re here, you might as well wait outside.” Without another word, she turned around and went down the hall, leaving Ace appalled at her blatant disrespect.

Even after Marisella’s barrage of insults, he still couldn’t get over the twisting feeling in his gut, the feeling only growing the longer he looked at the

wax figure. Eventually, he moved on, using the flame in his palm to illuminate his way as he ventured into the left part of the wax museum.

Marisella was on the other side of the wax museum, lost in thought. Was she still a little salty after needing to be saved like some damsel in distress from that Fear Spirit of Needles? Yes. Was she going to admit that to Ace? Not until the day pigs were flying. Marisella wandered the halls of the wax museum, coming across figures depicting people from all eras and from all over the globe–from Amelia Earhart to Martin Luther King Jr. to Neil Armstrong. The one thing all the figures had in common?

My God, did the artist mess up their faces.

No two eyebrows were the same size, the eyes were either horribly misplaced or comically wrong in size–both too big and too small–the nose was askew on nearly all of them, the ears looked more like enlarged snail shells, and the hair looked like they dumped a bucket of hot wax onto the sculpture, vaguely molded it and then called it a day.

Each one was somehow worse than the other, but outside of the face, she had to appreciate the handiwork and attention to detail on the body. Though, even after what she felt was a thorough search of the entire left hand side of the building, she found nothing but hundreds of wax statues.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the museum, Ace was having the same problem–he too couldn't find anything other than wax statues with deformed faces and otherwise perfectly sculpted bodies. He kept his fire close to him, knowing the wax would melt if the licks of flame got too close to it.

He walked past still wax figure after still wax figure. He was surrounded by them, unaware that the moment his eyes turned away from one, it would move a fraction of an inch, almost as if it were reaching out to grab him, sometimes it would nearly manage to grasp a hair on the back of his head and snap back to its original position before being caught.

One figure—detailed to look like the masked Zodiac Killer—dared to try further, its wax finger managing to take hold of a longer hair, yanking it out and managing to perfectly resume its original position moments before Ace whipped around, aiming a bolt of fire right at its face. Ace held his gaze on the Spirit for a long, tense moment, not daring to even blink a second longer than necessary.

Eventually, he was satisfied with its stillness, his guard now raised to the uncanny statues surrounding him on all sides. Then, hearing the sounds of wax moving behind him, he turned around and launched a bolt of flames straight through the chest of an unsuspecting statue, melting a hole through it.

He was safe.

Or so he thought.

Out of sight, a red blur zipped from statue to statue, traveling from the left side of the building to the right, observing a woman with sun-kissed skin surrounded by statues as the boy Ace was. The entity could feel less power emanating from her, so she would definitely be an easier target.

It zipped into a statue molded to look like a wrestler. *Yes, this will do,* it thought, watching the clueless girl turn her back to it. It made its move, choosing brute force over silence. It moved in an instant, clasping a wax hand

over the girl's mouth and clamping down, keeping her scream in her mouth. Unfortunately for the Spirit, a blade of water cut into the wax, severing the hand, which fell to the floor. The hand of the statue fell to the floor.

Marisella escaped the grip of the statue, stumbling back while wiping the taste of wax off her lips. Unlike Ace, her eyes were keen enough to see the zip of red color escape the statue, going into other statues and getting away in seconds. She knew what this was–though most Spirits couldn't possess objects, a few could. One such spirit was the Fear Spirit of Automatonophobia, the fear of human-like figures.

She cursed to herself, dashing after the blur–the Spirit itself–zipping between wax statues, doing what she could to stay behind it. A curious property of the Spirit was the inability to move possessed objects while they were within human sight. She didn't question it, just utilized it to her advantage.

As she made a mad dash towards the right side of the museum, she destroyed as many of the wax statues as she could. As she ran from one statue to another, she robbed the air of its moisture–as well as borrowed it from her own body–to create slashes of pressurized water, cutting them up and leaving the statues as fragments of what they once were.

Eventually, her eyes rested on Ace, who had his back turned to her. She didn't want to help him, maybe let him struggle for a bit as a payback for their other mission, but if word got to Theodora then it could be bad news for her. "Ace! The Spirit controls the statues! It can't move when you're looking at it!" she yelled at him, stopping next to him. She heard the shifting of a statue

behind her, looking over her shoulder just in time to see a wax statue frozen, its fingers inches from where her head was only moments ago.

Ace and Marisella stuck close, their backs to each other while their hands held the respective elements under their control. Their eyes frantically scanned the statues for a hint of movement, or a single indication that one of them stood out from the others. Just then, a horrible thought occurred to them at the exact same time.

They were completely surrounded on all sides.

• • •

Ace and Marisella both looked at the encircling wax statues, both paranoid and on edge about every single one. Any one of them could be possessed by the Fear Spirit, meaning any one of them could jump out and grab them if they looked away for even a second. Ace didn't dare restrict his gaze, letting it shuffle between all of them, trying to watch all of them at the same time.

CRASH. The sound of a wax statue—the same one of the Zodiac Killer—falling and splitting into hundreds of little pieces echoed through the abandoned building, drawing the attention of both Marisella and Ace, their bodies betraying them. The two only realized their mistake when Marisella was grabbed, yet again, by a statue—this one of Amelia Earhart, the figure's face contorted with sinister pleasure. This time, it began closing on her neck.

Ace whipped his head around, sending a pillar of fire into the statue holding Marisella, melting the wax encasing her. The Spirit zipped out of the statue, but he didn't care, he continued burning the wax until it melted into nothing more than a puddle on the ground, freeing Marisella.

The action gave Marisella a lightbulb moment. "If you burn the statues, the Spirit can't possess them!" She wished she could actually destroy the statues, but she saw multiple broken statues that were not in their original position, meaning the Spirit could possess and move them no problem. Ace nodded at her request, sending plumes of flame through the building, melting all the wax into blobs of colored liquid on the ground.

Marisella grabbed Ace by the wrist, taking him through the building to the front, hearing the figures move wherever the crackling fire and their watchful gaze was absent. Soon, nearly the whole building was up in flames, the smell of burning wax invading their noses.

Then, only one statue remained–George Washington–its brows melted though its figure was mostly intact. Both of them saw the bolt of color zip into the leg of the wax statue, possessing the figure. "Last one!" Marisella shouted, pointing at the statue.

Ace dedicated both hands to sending fire straight into it, the curls of heat taking shape wrapping around every curve, melting the surface it feasted on. The eyes of it glowed the same vibrant red of the Spirit, as the statue's mouth opened to let out an unearthly howl as the Spirit burned to death.

Almost for good measure, the wooden supports holding up the ceiling fell down on the statue, crushing it even more. "We need to go–*now*!" Marisella

shouted, tugging him as the fire burned the almost-completely wooden museum, destroying it with them still inside.

Marisella created a wave of water, taking them forward and extinguishing the flames in front of them, making a split in the flames and allowing them to escape with only minor injuries–most on Marisella's neck where the statue had held her.

They burst through the front door, shattering the glass, the sound drowned out by the overwhelming noise of the burning building that was now behind them. They turned, standing in front of it, looking up at the spectacle created by the engulfing fire. Marisella used what little of the moisture in the air she could, extinguishing the flames, but with the fire consuming everything in its path, it was a futile attempt at best.

Ace put a hand on her shoulder, stopping her. "Marisella, let's get back to Theodora. We need to report to her about the mission, and the fire department is on its way," he said, gently turning her away from the fire. She nodded in response, though it was distant, like she was lost in her own world. She followed Ace as though his hand was tethering her.

Ace began walking away with her, the flames burning brightly in the distance as sirens approached, growing louder and louder as they got to the burning museum.

A job well done.

Chapter 15: Promotion Mission

Marisella and Theodora stood in the latter's office, the former's fists clenched tightly at her side. Marisella had been called into Theodora's office for some news–news she wasn't expecting, not in a million years. When she had first heard it, she almost thought Theodora was joking.

"You're seriously demoting me to Level A?!" Marisella exclaimed, her brows furrowing and her face contorting in anger. Theodora, on the other hand, kept her face neutral, taking a sip from her teacup.

"Marisella, understand that I am not doing this out of spite. I have my reasons, reasons I don't have a problem detailing to you. Both your behavior as of recent and your succession rate and injury count on missions are cause for concern–"

"Cause for concern?!" Marisella shouted, interrupting Theodora, whose gaze sharpened into a glare at the girl. Marisella barely noticed, continuing to shout protests. "I was rightfully given my Level! I *deserve* to be a Level X! I am not weak, you old hag, I am *not,* by any stretch of your demented imagination, *weak*!"

"Watch your words, Marisella. Your emotions make you a wildcard. A job like this cannot afford to have a wildcard. I recommend you bite your tongue

and accept this with grace," Theodora said, dismissing Marisella with a half-hearted wave of her hand.

"You can't be serious, I–!"

"Silence, Marisella," Theodora interrupted before continuing, "go back to your dorm. One more word out of your mouth here and I'll consider demoting you lower than Level A."

With fury in her eyes, Marisella turned on her heel, fuming as she stormed out of Theodora's office. If that wasn't enough to get the message across, the slam of the door behind her definitely was.

Marisella would show her, she'd show her just how strong she was.

• • •

Ace held his head high as he walked to Theodora's office. He felt good today, his mood high because William had hinted that he was about to be promoted to a Level B Shaman.

In fact, he was in such a cheery mood that he barely even noticed Marisella, the girl glaring daggers at him with every step that he took. If looks could kill, he was a dead man walking. He walked up to Theodora's office, opened the door and stepped inside.

Theodora was already sitting on the ground, her legs crossed in front of her. Her eyes were closed, but opened to reveal her gray irises upon the sound of

Ace entering her office. She shifted in her spot as he drew close, finding a more comfortable position for their conversation.

"Ace," she started, prompting him to sit down with a gesture of her hand. "I've come to the conclusion that you no longer need to be supervised on all your missions, you may even be strong enough for a promotion. If you do well on your next mission, you will be granted Level B, and you'll no longer need to have supervision on your further missions."

Ace was only half listening to their conversation. The other half of him was trying to ignore the feeling in his gut that someone who wasn't supposed to be listening to the conversation was doing just that. He had experienced a similar feeling in Theodora's office after he was injured from the Fear Spirit of Stalkers, though not as intense.

And, just as he did then, he ignored the feeling, focusing his full attention on Theodora and their conversation. It took him a moment to realize what she had said, but the moment he did, his spirits were lifted greatly. He imagined himself soon slaying a Spirit with flames and saving the life of an innocent.

"I'll do it," he said, to which Theodora nodded subtly. She told him the details of the mission–where the Spirit was spotted, its predicted level, etc–Ace nodding along as she did. Determined to impress her, he eagerly left the office. As he stepped out onto the Shaman Base, a silhouette darted out of sight before Ace could see who it was. He glanced over to where the shadow had been, only to find nothing out of place, yet an on-edge feeling overtook him, nerves creeping up and along his skin. He shook his head, convincing himself it was nothing more than a trick of the light.

He walked across the Shaman Base and through the door into the abandoned apartment complex. He avoided the plethora of murky puddles on the concrete ground of the ruined building. He began walking to the location Theodora gave him, wandering along the streets of the city, the sidewalks occasionally holding a stranger while a car drove by to a location unknown.

With every step of the way, he had the eerie feeling of someone's eyes on him. The streets were deserted, and soon, Ace saw why. A gigantic Spirit stood right in the middle of an intersection, though it stood like it was deep under the sea.

It was a mechanical beast, a gigantic monster with skin of steel, a colossal titan with artificial organs and fake beats of a crafted heart. One of its arms was a submarine; the other had the drill of an oil rig in place of a hand, rust coating the sharp edges of the mining tool turned weapon.

Where its head would be was an antique diving helmet, filled with water in which transparent fish swam and kelp danced. Every part of the Spirit seemed to have similar parts, with large copper pipes and dark blue metal over which light waved making it appear that the Spirit was under the ocean and not standing in the midst of a city.

The Spirit echoed a sound like metal bending under water pressure when it turned its head toward Ace, the eyes of the transparent fish locking onto him. Ace made his hands into fists, realizing he left his staff back in his dorm room. He felt his heart skip a beat as a sudden wave of fear washed over him.

He pushed past the feeling, setting his arms ablaze in anticipation for the fight. Little drops of rain fell from the sky, sizzling away as they touched the

crackling flames engulfing his skin. The Spirit took a stance in front of him, the water droplets running down its metal skin as its gigantic feet dug into the concrete.

The Spirit brought back its arm, launching its submarine arm down at the comparatively shorter boy. Ace stumbled backwards, having enough time to run out of the way and avoid the attack, the submarine crushing the ground where he was standing moments ago. In a split second decision, he ran over to the submarine, clambering on and running up the Spirit's arm.

While he ran, fire spilt off his arm, melting the metal structure of it while he traveled upwards. He brought his hands down onto the Spirit's shoulder, igniting it and letting the fire feed on the metal it spread. The Spirit made a sound similar to the one it had when it had spotted Ace, though barely weaker.

The Spirit brought up its other hand–the oil rig drill–and sent it toward Ace. Ace's eyes widened, and, in a split second, he realized he wouldn't have enough time to make his fire useful or to even run out of the way. In a blink, his memories all flashed before his eyes, every moment he could and couldn't remember over years of life.

The drill came closer and closer, Ace frozen from fear. He accepted the fate facing him. He let his eyes close, not bearing to look at what would be the cause of his demise. He could hear the drill begin to power on, the spinning of the rusted metal making a horrible sound. Finally, the drill–

BOOM

The rain in the air had condensed into a singular beam, piercing through the drill and mostly destroying it, sending it backward and causing the Spirit to

stumble. For a moment, he didn't understand what had happened, then his brain remembered the only person he knew with the ability to do that. He turned his head in the direction of the beam.

Marisella.

The girl only looked at the Spirit for a second, her eyes going to Ace immediately after. In her eyes was anger. At the same time he felt blood drip down from his earlobe. At that moment he connected the dots, realizing something that made his heart beat ten times quicker.

She wasn't aiming at the Spirit.

She was aiming at him.

He wasn't sure if she had gone insane, or knew why she was aiming another bolt of water right at his face, but his survival instincts told him the answer could wait, to which he agreed. He moved his face out of the way, the beam of water cutting through where the center of his face had been. The beam had enough pressure to do some serious damage, if not kill, which meant he had to focus on killing the titan of a Spirit *and* dodging the attacks of a Shaman who was supposed to be his ally.

He continued to spread fire along the Spirit, while running to take cover from Marisella behind its head. Pain pulsed through his head from his earlobe, yet he ignored it, focusing on the task at hand–avoiding Marisella and defeating the Spirit beneath him. The rain was robbed straight from the air, coming straight to Marisella's open palms, where she caught it and melded it into an orb, ready to fire at her discretion.

She lurked, like a predator, around the Spirit, spying where Ace was hiding, lying in wait for him to make a wrong move and allow her to strike–to prove to Theodora that she was strong enough for Level X, to prove to Theodora she wasn't weak, to prove to Theodora she wasn't a wildcard that couldn't be trusted.

The Spirit stumbled and staggered, trying futilely to put out the fire on its body, its attention diverted from both the Shamans. Ace got a glance inside the diving helmet once more, seeing the transparent fish again. In a flash, he had a eureka moment. The titan of metal and shipwrecked submarines and oil rigs wasn't the Spirit, the fish inside the helmet were–the titan was acting more as a mech, if anything.

He placed his palms flat on the helmet, staying out of sight of Marisella, though that was growing difficult with the constant movement of the Spirit beneath him. He began to heat up his hands, the metal absorbing it and heating the water inside, slowly bringing the temperature up and up and up until finally.

Boiling.

The mech's arms went up to its head, trying in vain to save itself. Ace and Marisella both saw the fish inside begin swimming around, fear in their beady transparent eyes as they realized they were going to die. Soon enough, the fish stopped swimming, their stomachs pointing upwards as they rose to the top of the helmet.

Without the Spirit alive, the mech fell to the ground, dissolving midair and becoming nothing but dust just inches before it reached the ground. Ace rode it

down, landing safely on the concrete, the Spirit thoroughly killed and gone with the wind in just a matter of seconds.

He caught his breath, forgetting about Marisella for the moment. Though, she didn't let that be the case for long, sending a beam of water straight towards Ace, who was far enough away to look up and see the pressurized water going straight towards his head.

• • •

Seconds before the bolt of water could hit his skull, he had brought his hands up and sent fire from them, stopping the water with the hottest fire he could muster, the flames acting as a barrier between him and Marisella. The two were in a back and forth, a tug of war between conflicting elements of nature. Her water was extinguishing his fire, and his fire was boiling off her water. Perfect opposites, yin and yang, sun and moon, dark and light.

The water pushed his fire back more and more, making him stagger backward, his fire dwindling and dwindling, growing weaker under the pressure of the water pushing on it. His fire couldn't boil enough water to keep up with Marisella.

Wait, he thought. *I don't have to get rid of the water, I have to stop the source–stop the faucet instead of pulling the plug.* With that in mind, he began to heat up the water, the heat spreading down the constant stream, eventually reaching Marisella's hands, her palms touching the liquid. She couldn't hold it

for long before she broke, stopping the water as she grabbed at her hands, first degree burns ruining the light brown skin of her palm.

She looked up from her hands to Ace–who had seized all his fire, leaving both of them standing there, defenseless–with pure, unadulterated rage in her hazel irises. “You–!” she started, only to stop once the voice of a familiar older woman interrupted her.

“Marisella. Ace.” Both of them turned at the sound of their names, seeing Theodora standing a few paces away. “You two are coming with me. *Now*.” The woman’s voice held a sharp and strong authority he hadn’t seen her demonstrate before. This was probably the most emotion she had shown since her fear at the reveal of the Fear Spirit of Death.

The walk back to the Shaman Base was quiet and suspenseful, with a handful of nerves thrown in for good measure. Finally, the three of them sat down when they got into Theodora’s office. Theodora spent no time getting straight to the point.

“Marisella, what you did was completely and utterly stupid. You purposefully left the Shaman Base with the intent of hurting another Shaman because *I* hurt your ego over something that was true. Not only that, you proved my point about being a wildcard with behavior that’s entirely inappropriate for a job like this. I should have you demoted another Level–maybe even removed from Shamanism entirely, if I’m being honest–but I won’t. This will be your final warning, Marisella. That is as much a promise as a threat. Now, I want you to leave and take time off to cool down.”

Theodora pointed to the door, and Marisella opened her mouth to speak, only to close it again with a finalizing glare from Theodora. Marisella nodded, shooting daggers at both the other Shamans in the room, then stood up and left, leaving Theodora and Ace to their business.

Once Theodora was sure the girl had left, she turned her attention to Ace. “Ace, once I discovered Marisella had left and deduced her motives, I went to see if my intervention was needed. I almost stepped in, but you proved yourself capable. I am proud to say that you will be officially promoted to Level B; however, I will still send others on your missions as a precautionary measure. I don’t want Marisella acting out again.”

Chapter 16: Comforting the Spirit Killer

“Now, I want you to relax for a while. You won’t be going on any missions, but you *will* still be training and building your strength,” Theodora said to Ace, their conversation coming to an end. Ace nodded in response, not rebutting against her order and leaving the office, stepping out onto the Shaman Base. He didn’t feel like training today, not after the rollercoaster of events that was his promotion mission.

He wandered around the base, his mind lost in thought as his body moved along on autopilot. He didn’t realize he was at a more secluded part of the Shaman Base until his mind was brought back to reality, his eyes focused on the treeline surrounding the Shaman Base.

He turned around to walk back to his dorm, only to hear Heidi’s voice muttering words only a few paces away. He glanced into the trees, seeing Heidi tinkering on RT-781 more, a screwdriver deep in its back while its eyes flickered and flashed sporadically. He couldn’t quite catch what the woman was saying, only bits and pieces.

He felt his face twist up at the oddity of it, his mind flooding with concern and worry. She was talking to herself, yes, but that wasn’t what was triggering the alarms in his brain. It was *what* she was saying that made his senses tell him danger was imminent.

She was saying things along the lines of “rebirth” and mentioning Shamans, not anything that would’ve been related to fixing whatever problem was messing up RT’s computing. Ace shook his head, turning away and beginning to walk back to the Dormitories, chalking up the confusing words to delusions from the crazy turn of events that had happened that day, as well his exhaustion.

It didn’t take long for him to get to the Dorms, though he stopped himself before he went inside. He hadn’t talked to William or Yujiro in a few days. With their self-imposed isolation after the Fear Spirit of Death reared its ugly head and all his missions with Marisella, Ace had completely forgotten to check up on them.

Better late than never, he thought to himself. He changed direction, moving to the Training Center, stepping inside and ascending the stairs, Ace found Yujiro and William sitting on the floor Yujiro’s training space William’s arm resting atop both of Yujiro’s shoulders, the latter’s face was buried in his knees, his arms wrapped around them and holding them against his chest, his form balled up and looking smaller, paler and more gaunt than ever.

He looked just… *bad*. Ace hesitantly walked over, concern etched onto his face. Upon closer inspection, Yujiro was sitting on a throw pillow of sorts, William having no doubt selflessly given it to him, taking the floor without complaint.

“Yujiro, love, please listen to me. There are Shamans all over the state looking for it. It’ll be gone before you know it, and everything will be good

again. Believe me when I say that." He moved his hand, caressing Yujiro by rubbing his back up and down with his hand in a reassuring way.

Ace hadn't known a lot about Yujiro's current condition, but the little he did know was that Yujiro's anxiety had gotten particularly worse, making him basically a ball of nerves that one wrong move could set off into a panic attack. The only person who had been around him was William. Sensing the conversation that he was eavesdropping on was a private one, Ace turned to leave, but his presence was revealed by a creaky floorboard.

Yujiro and William both looked over at him, Ace giving a sheepish wave to the two of them. Ace looked over the both of them for a moment, clearing his throat before speaking nervously. "Sorry, I was just coming to check in on Yujiro. If it's a bad time, I can go," he said as he started to back away, only for William to shake his head and beckon him to come closer.

"Can you watch Yujiro for a second? Distract him, maybe? I need to…" He trailed off, his voice dropping to a whisper as he leaned closer to Ace, taking care for Yujiro not to hear. "I need you to distract him so I can get him something. Something that'll cheer him up," he explained, occasionally sparing a glance at Yujiro to make sure he wasn't listening.

Yujiro, oblivious to William's plan, rested his head on his knees, looking tired and drained. The sight tugged at Ace's heartstrings. "How long will you be?" he asked in a whisper, his eyes still on Yujiro as the words left his mouth.

"Not too long–only about fifteen minutes, twenty at the most. Just take his mind off his parents or the Spirit, get him talking, anything. Distract him until I'm back." William stood up, his hand leaving his lover's back as he rushed

downstairs, going down the steps two at a time. Ace had the perfect question to distract Yujiro; he was confident it would work.

Ace sat down next to Yujiro, seeing more clearly how poor his condition really was. He had heavy bags under his eyes, and his black hair was messier than usual. Nightmares, maybe? Probably. Best not to bring it up. “So, how did you meet William?” Ace asked, the question visibly making Yujiro relax, even if it was only a little.

Yujiro looked over, a fond smile crossing his lips. “You really want to know? Well, I have to warn you, William’s a bit cheesy in it.” He took a deep breath, as if he was steeling himself, before starting the story. “So, before William was a Shaman, we were both going to the same high school–the same one as you, too. We had the same Japanese class, and I had a perfect A in it.

“Anyway, one day, William came up to me. At that point, he was a stranger to me, and he asked me if I could tutor him for the upcoming test in the class. If you asked him, he would’ve said that he used his charm to convince me to do it, but I did it because he was practically begging me to do it.”

Ace laughed lightly. “That sounds like him.”

“So, I started tutoring him for the test. And slowly, that spiraled into tutoring him for the rest of the stuff he ‘didn’t understand.’ During our tutoring sessions, he’d bring me sweets and little trinkets because ‘he didn’t want to take advantage of my kindness,’ though I’m pretty sure he was just trying to win me over. Eventually, he told me that he wanted to become fluent in the language, and I–reluctantly–did my best to teach him.

“Then, one day, we sat down for our weekly tutoring, and he had bought me a bouquet of carnations–my favorite flower–and a box of chocolates. And, in broken Japanese, mind you, he asked me to be his boyfriend. So, here we are. We’ve been together for nearly two years.” Yujiro leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes and reminiscing on the times he had spent with William, a small smile molding his lips.

Ace was about to say something in response, but William’s return interrupted them. “Yujiro, Ace! I’m back!” he said, bounding up the stairs with his hands behind his back, quite obviously hiding something. He walked up to the both of them, bringing his hands around to show Yujiro the two items he had been holding behind his back

The first item was a small bag with a floral pattern. Opening it revealed some sort of candy which Yujiro recognized. He reached for the bag of candy, but his eyes were drawn to the second item in William’s hands. It was a keychain. Not just any keychain, but one that was a graphic of a cat with white fur, a pink tongue sticking out, and bright green eyes–the feline looking as dumb as it was silly.

Yujiro gasped, his usual playful and somewhat childish nature returning upon seeing it. “Kitty! Give!” He nabbed the keychain right out of William’s hand, looking and acting as giddy as a kid on Christmas morning. William laughed softly, sitting down next to Yujiro, his arm resuming the position around the other’s shoulders.

The mood had clearly lightened, and Ace sensed the tender moment was one that was only to be shared between Yujiro and William. William mouthed a

thank you at Ace as the latter rose from his spot against the wall and began to walk away, going back to the Dormitory Building.

Maybe today was the start of going back uphill.

Maybe.

Chapter 17: The Rogue

Ace, William, and RT-781 were called to Theodora's office over a new intercom system designed by RT. The loud speakerphone on the corner of all the buildings rang out with Theodora's gruff and serious voice. "ACE HAWKINS, WILLIAM BAKER, AND RT-781, PLEASE REPORT TO MY OFFICE IMMEDIATELY FOR A MISSION." After the announcement, static came from the speakerphone before it went silent completely.

As instructed, the three Shamans went to Theodora's office, where the old woman paced around the room with a cigarette to her lips, inhaling the smoke before taking it away and puffing it out. She dropped the hot ashes, which still held some red sparks in it, onto a metal ashtray. The ashtray had many more ashes, though they were cold. Her pearly white toga caught some of the falling ashes, staining it gray. "We have a rogue Shaman on the loose," Theodora said simply, the cigarette in her hand morphing and changing into an orb of pure light. Theodora pushed it into the air, where it stayed floating above them.

That made Ace wonder, what were the other balls of light in the room? If she could transform anything into an orb made of light, then what was floating above them? Ace's train of thought was brought to a halt, and he was snapped back to reality by Theodora's continuing voice. "The Shaman was deemed dead by our databases after multiple reports by nearby Shamans. However, we just

saw him at the local morgue, and he's looked better, to put it lightly.," Theodora said. "He made a deal with a Spirit, that's for sure, but we don't know which one."

"Made a deal with a Spirit?" Ace asked, interrupting Theodora. A flash of vague annoyance made its way on Theodora's stern expression before it faded and she gave an explanation.

"Shamans will, rarely, go rogue–often due to insanity, which seems to be the case here. When they go rogue, they will often make a deal with a Spirit for abilities in exchange for doing something for the Spirit. That something is almost always killing Shamans or destroying Shaman Society," Theodora explained, her pacing coming to a stop as she turned to face them fully. Ace could see more wrinkles on her face than she had when he was enrolled some time ago, most likely being formed from stress and her seemingly permanent serious frown.

Ace nodded along with her explanation, taking in the information and mentally storing it. With some more information, such as the location where the rogue Shaman was last seen, the group of three Shamans were sent out to it. RT-781 took the lead, acting as a GPS with its mechanical heart.

The trio went down the street, turning onto a block Ace didn't recognize. The street of the city was entirely empty. As the night began to fall over the dead block, the street lights flickered on, illuminating the cracked sidewalks. Weeds and dandelions sprouted from the cracks in spite of the infrequent sunlight and the suffocating lack of water.

“PROCEED WITH CAUTION. IF CONTINUING ON THIS ROUTE. THERE WILL BE UNEVEN FOOTING, SO PLEASE WATCH YOUR STEP,” RT-781 suddenly announced from the voice box in its metallic throat, and stepped forward with whirring and grinding from gears and engines.

“As if. Anyone that trips over this would have to have two left feet—” As if activating a musical cue, the toe of William’s sneaker hit a bump in the sidewalk, making him stagger forward before catching himself. Ace snickered at the irony before stifling it with a hand over his mouth as William glared at him. “You didn’t see anything,” William said with deadpan seriousness as he readjusted himself after nearly face planting on the concrete.

Ace was just about to make a clever rebuttal when RT-781 spoke up once more, cutting him off. “WE HAVE ARRIVED AT THE SUSPECTED LOCATION; HALT YOURSELVES, WILLIAM AND ACE.” The robotic voice from RT seemed to scold the two boys, causing them to fall silent..

In front of RT-781, at the end of the block, was a mental hospital. An abandoned one. Almost all of the windows were shattered and broken, and the bricks that made up the walls had collected an impossible amount of dust, making it look even more rundown than it already did. The area looked like it hadn’t been walked on in years, maybe even decades.

“Why does everything have to be abandoned?” Ace asked rhetorically, throwing his hands up in the air with a pang of annoyance. William took the lead, walking toward the forgotten institution without a drop of fear in his eyes. The hospital looked just as bad on the inside as the outside, with broken medical equipment, sparking and flickering fluorescent lights, and the most

unsettling thing picked up by the senses: the echoing sound of maniacal laughter from the hallway in front of the trio.

The fluorescent lights flickered and flashed overhead, showing the trembling and laughing body of a man in a straight jacket, who looked to be in his thirties. The man was on his knees, his back to the Shamans. He laughed like a psychopath. That was, until William shouted to the man. “Shaman Society is here! We’re here to bring you to an early death so you don’t do the same to anyone else!”

The man clamped his jaw shut, rising from his knees with his arms crossed in the straight jacket. He turned slowly facing Ace and the other two Shamans. The man had a wicked psychopathic grin, showing his yellowed teeth, and sunken manic eyes with large bags under them. “I don’t think you will, *William Baker*.”

A shiver went down William’s spine as the rogue spoke his name, the words rolling off of it in a wicked twisted way. “How do you know my name, rogue?” William asked, drawing his sword from the sheath at his waist and holding it in one hand.

“*It* told it to me,” the rogue said, the simple sentence making the ambiance exponentially more creepy. Ace stepped forward, prepared to ask what this ‘it’ thing was, but he was cut off by the answer itself. A crimson red Spirit swam like a snake through the air, slithering through a wall like it wasn’t even there, snarling and salivating blood onto the tile floor of the mental hospital.

RT-781 made a beeping and whirring sound before speaking up. “FEAR-BORN SPIRIT OF BLOOD, LEVEL B.”

“That hunk of junk is right. This is *Minou*, my pet and fellow deal-maker.” The crimson Spirit nuzzled against the man like a cat to its owner. “And we’ll both kill you.”

The Spirit, Minou, coiled its tail back before launching at the three Shamans with a loud snake-like hiss, but RT threw a punch at Minou’s jaw and slammed it against the tile wall, shattering the old ceramic. With that cue, the man pivoted on his heel and dashed down the hall.

He was making his escape.

• • • • • • • • • • • • •

“ACE! WILLIAM! I WILL SLAY THIS SPIRIT IN COMBAT IN DUE TIME, YOU MUST HALT THE ROGUE AND DEFEAT HIM IN COMBAT.” RT-781 called out to the two other Shamans as it continued its fight with the Fear Spirit of Blood. The two seemed to be at an equal skill level at first, but in reality, RT-781 was much more powerful and skilled than the Spirit. It would kill the Spirit in no time. That is, if the extra hunk of machinery installed inside it wasn’t weighing it down.

The two boys nodded, dashing down the hall to follow after the rogue Shaman. Despite being handicapped by a straightjacket and insanity, the man ran surprisingly fast. Just as they were about to catch him, the man turned the

corner and ran down a stairwell; a worn sign above the stairs read “MORGUE”.

“That can’t be good,” William muttered to himself as he saw the sign. Despite this, he continued down the stairs with Ace. The basement was nearly pitch-black and olid from the rotting and forgotten bodies stored in the morgue compartments. Ace set the orb on his staff ablaze, lighting up the room. He did it just in time to see the dead bodies animate themselves and escape the morgue compartments . The dead rising once more.

And the rogue had complete control over them.

Chapter 18: Flesh and Blood

The burning flame from Ace's staff illuminated the animated forms of the bodies in the morgue. Their skin was yellow from rot with bones showing through open wounds. "You… You're a Flesh Manipulator, aren't you?" William asked, his sword drawn and at his hip. The only sounds filling the silence in response were the faint crackling of flames on Ace's staff and the muffled sounds of RT fighting the Blood Spirit on the floor above them.

A devilish grin grew on the rogue Shaman's face. The smile held malice and evil between every yellowed tooth. "You would be right in that assumption, William. I do think you'll be a good fight for my little friends." The man gestured with his head to the animated bodies of dead patients. With that as their cue, the bodies rushed at William.

In an instant, William brought his hand up and clenched his fist, the closest animated body to him instantly exploded. "If you know me, you must know I can control all metals. That includes the iron in blood. I can make someone explode by the iron of the blood." Ace shuddered at William's cold words; the thought of William exploding a being terrified him.

"Ace, go for the Shaman, I can hold back the bodies," William said as he cut the arm off of an animated corpse. Ace nodded, rushing past the animated corpses, controlled by the Flesh Manipulator. Suddenly, a band of flesh

connected between the two walls at Ace's feet, tripping him. Ace fell to the ground, his staff knocked out of his hand. He looked behind him; William was getting overwhelmed and restrained by the animated corpses. Ace got up, engulfing his fists in white and red flames. Ace ran at the rogue Shaman, kicking away pieces of shaped and manipulated flesh that tried to trip him as he went.

The next moment, he was engaging in fist-to-Blessing combat with the Shaman. The flesh manipulator used separated limbs to bite scratch and kick at him, even making arms out of flesh to punch Ace. A punch from the fake limbs landed on Ace's stomach, staggering him. Flesh wrapped around Ace's wrists, restraining him and trapping him against the tile wall of the morgue.

The rogue slowly began to laugh maniacally, a drop of blood dripping from the side of his mouth and down his chin. He stepped closer to Ace, breathing heavily. "You're a damn good fighter, Ace. Too bad a dead man is no use to the Shaman Society." A spear made of flesh formed in front of Ace, the pointed tip mere inches away from his heart, which beat faster and faster every second.

Just as the rogue pulled the spear back to stab, Ace set his flesh-made restraints on fire, freeing his wrists. He grabbed the flesh spear a second before it caught his heart, doing the same to it. The white flames spread quickly, burning the skin of the flesh as it crept closer to the rogue Shaman.

The fire caught the Shaman's straight jacket, setting him on fire. The Shaman screamed, unable to put himself out with his hands, collapsing on the ground, unmoving. Ace quickly ran back to William. He was still held against the wall by the animated bodies, but they soon fell limp–the control of the

Rogue Shaman had released over them–, crashing against the floor. William took a deep breath. “Thanks,” he said simply with a nod, removing himself from the wall and stepping over to Ace.

“Let’s explore this place. Rogue Shamans usually work in groups. I’ve never seen a single Rogue Shaman,” William cautioned, unsheathing his sword and keeping it out for protective purposes. With a somewhat reluctant nod of agreement, Ace followed William deeper into the morgue.

They stepped over the rogue’s dead body, the skin charred and blackened, flaky from the now-dead fire. It was a sickening sight, and Ace couldn’t hold a shudder back as he looked at the unrecognizable face of the dead Shaman.

He’s evil, he deserved this. If we didn’t do this, hundreds of others could’ve died, Ace told himself in his mind, justifying his actions. Despite himself, he was in moral turmoil about the situation. Ace had mostly grown accustomed to killing Spirits. It was easy to do. Spirits didn’t have morals, goals, beliefs, personalities, flaws, emotions. They were easy to justify killing, but he had just ended the life of a *human being*. Someone with all the aforementioned traits.

He couldn’t shake the feeling of pity and disgust for what he had done. Even if it was for ‘the greater good’.

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The deeper they went into the morgue, the more his mind drifted away from the dead man, instead refocusing on searching. For what, however, he wasn't quite sure. The area gradually got dimmer and dimmer, more putrid and more immoral. Rough sketches of a Vitruvian man-style figure were carved into the walls, only they were of a Spirit. A Spirit Ace didn't recognize. Next to the sketches were archaic and cryptic texts in a language either long gone or unknown to the modern world. Possibly a language of *Spirits?*

They rounded the corner, and William said something to Ace. "You might want to close your eyes for this. This sight isn't for the weak-stomached," he said firmly, even as William shuddered as he saw it. Ace did as William warned, shutting his eyes and letting William guide him through the long passageway. Grim curiosity flooded his mind the longer he sightlessly walked, especially as he stepped on uneven and fragile ground, the objects crunching and breaking under his feet.

Finally, a door was pushed open, possibly a metal one, and shut behind the two of them as they walked through it. "You can open your eyes now," William said, letting go of Ace's shoulder, which he had been holding to guide his friend.

Ace slowly opened his eyes, coming face-to-face with a small circular room reminiscent of a laboratory. At the far end of the room was a curved wooden table, rot and dead wood made up the once pristine oak table. On the table were beakers and chemical tubes stained with various colorful chemicals now dried and lost to time.

However, the thing that stood out most in the room was a massive symbol carved into the wall, like the Vitruvian Spirit. It had a large, near-perfect circle encompassing an eye, the pupil replaced with a large S. William seemed to recognize the symbol in an instant, cursing under his breath and running his hand through his hair, tapping his foot on the ground as his eyes darted over the emblem.

“What is it?” Ace asked out of curiosity, his eyes shifting quickly between the mysterious emblem and William, who seemed to be silently panicking, though it was hard to tell in the nearly pitch-black room.

“I know this symbol,” he said ominously, moving his hand down to bite his nails. “It’s the emblem used by Liberation. An organized group of Rogue Shamans, whose aim is to destroy Shaman Society.” He shook his head and bit down on his fingernails. “I thought the Shaman Society got rid of them a long time ago…”

After a tense moment of silence, William said they should go, taking Ace by the hand and leading him back down the hallway through which they had entered, barely giving Ace enough time to shut his eyes. Even as he shut his eyes, he caught a glimpse of a decaying skeleton, the eyeless sockets seeming to stare right at Ace, gazing into his soul and judging his moral decisions. He suddenly knew what the fragile objects under his feet were, and it made a shiver crawl down his spine like the unsettling steps of an insect.

The two Shamans went up the stairs, Ace was finally freed from his blindness, finding RT-781 in the hallway standing over a broken chunk of the tile. However, finding out that Liberation still existed was the least of their

problems at that moment. Down in the basement, the rogue was still alive, scorched and charred, but alive. The rogue used the last of his power to create one last monster, his own final act of revenge.

Bones cracking and shaping, flesh bending and warping, blood pouring and filling. Fearful sounds came from the morgue as all of the corpses stitched themself together with the rogue Shaman's control, becoming one single amalgamated entity. The creature of flesh and blood exhaled a scream of agony that sent chills through Ace and William, raising the hairs on their necks. Ace slowly craned his head to look at the entrance to the basement, and into the darkness hiding the monster.

Then Ace saw it. He saw the amalgamated mass of flesh and bone that was the Shaman's Frankenstein. It had multiple heads and tens of limbs protruding from everywhere on its body. One mass with many consciousnesses. The monster charged up the stairs as best it could, giving chase. Ace jumped back, running to RT-781 and William.

"Run!" was all he could shout before the monster slammed itself into the wall just behind Ace, trying to catch him in a bull charge to no avail. William's eyes widened as well, and he cursed under his breath before following Ace, with RT right behind him. The three Shamans ran through the blinking and sputtering lights of the hospital.

The horrid monster behind them poured blood from its many maws as it charged at them, its form top-heavy and uneven. The monster gained on them, inching closer and closer with its charge. The Shamans narrowly dodged it

when they turned the corner, the monster slamming against the wall with such force that it shattered the tile.

With that slam, the mental hospital began to groan and bend. It was collapsing, and they were right in the middle of it. They needed to get out quickly, or else they'd be crushed along with the monster. The monster didn't seem to care. Its only objective was to kill.

"We need to get out of here!" William shouted over the screeching and running of the monster, which remained hot on their tail. Debris began to fall from the ceiling, concrete chunks with bars and wires protruding from them, creating obstacles, which made running from the monster that much harder. RT cleared the obstacles with no problem, running without a sweat. William and Ace, on the other hand, were much sloppier, as parts of their clothing snagged on the chunks of debris and slowed them down.

Then they saw it, the doors to the mental hospital. They were too small for the humongous monster to fit through, so all they needed to do was get there, which was easier said than done. The monster reached out a lanky and rotten arm, grasping at Ace. It was only inches away from grabbing him when the trio burst through the hospital doors, narrowly escaping its clutches.

Ace looked back, panting and covered in sweat, as the mental hospital collapsed on the monster, crushing it under the rubble. They all stood there for a second, motionless. The only sounds were the whirring from RT-781, the cicadas chirping, and the panting of Ace and William. RT-781 spoke up, breaking the almost silence.

"STATUS UPDATE: DEAD. MISSION COMPLETED."

Chapter 19: Not to flex or anything, but…

The walk back to the Shaman Base was eerily silent, the weight of both Liberation's existence and the recent death of a Shaman–even though a rogue–resting on William and Ace's shoulders. It felt inappropriate to say anything, so the only sound that filled their voluntary silence was the inner workings of RT-781, who walked on as usual–unbothered and unaffected.

At last, Ace couldn't bear it any longer. Too many thoughts were running around in his mind, too many to keep from reaching his mouth and spilling out, including his growing curiosity and suspicion about RT. Finally, a question began to force itself out of his mouth.

"Wh–"

Before he could finish his first word, a bellowing sound came from the distance, one that made the hairs on the back of all their necks–with the obvious exception of RT-781–rise with a terrible concoction of horror, terror, and, most prominently, fear. All three of the Shamans turned their heads in grim curiosity, seeing a behemoth of a Spirit in the distance.

The Spirit towered as tall as the buildings around it. It had armor that looked ripped straight out of a sci-fi movie, with blue light pulsating from gaps

in the pearly white metal. It looked like it had come from hundreds of years in the future, a metallic screen acting as its head, with red pixels painting a furious and bloodthirsty expression.

William drew his sword, the light rain falling from the sky *plinking* against the silver of the blade. “It’s huge,” he said to himself, cracking his knuckles and tightening his grip on the sword. “Not that size is a problem. That’ll just make me cooler when I kill it.”

“ANALYZING… ANALYZING… ANALYZING… SPIRIT FOUND: FEAR-BORN SPIRIT OF THE ROBOTIC SINGULARITY–LEVEL X,” RT-781 said, the whirring within it increasing as it analyzed the Spirit.

Ace stepped forward, ready to fight the Spirit alongside William and RT, only for William to stop him, putting a hand on his chest. “Stay back, relax, and enjoy the show, Ace. I’ll get this one, and you can stay here and wallow in my glory and power.” Ace rolled his eyes at William’s playful ego, but he complied anyway, letting him fight the Spirit solo.

“Hey, you glorified heap of lug nuts! I could beat you in an instant with my Blessing, but I’ll make things interesting and show you how strong I am *without* cheating!” William shouted, stepping forward as he challenged the Spirit, having to yell to get its attention.

That did it, Ace thought as the Spirit craned its gigantic head to look at William, the pixels on its screen shifting to reveal a furious expression. The Spirit let out a horrifying mechanical sound, making goosebumps rise on Ace’s skin.

“Let’s make this extra interesting for the viewers at home!” William said to no one in particular. William stretched out his hand, morphing both a light pole and his unsheathed silver sword into a shining gray blob in the air under his blessing. “I read about this in a comic book once,” he whispered to Ace, seeming not to take the fight seriously. He ran over to the blob of metal that was once the light pole and sword but had now transformed into a metallic surfboard, floating in the air weightlessly.

When William jumped on and looked up, he saw a gigantic missile shooting straight towards him. Without breaking a sweat, he weaved around it, using his blessing to send it upwards to explode in the sky, saving anything and everything from being damaged. He made a chastising sound to the Spirit, wagging his finger slowly like he was scolding a cat.

“Tsk tsk tsk, that’s no way to play fair, mister heap of lug nuts. Why don’t we just play nice?” he asked mockingly, zooming through the air on his metal surfboard and dodging the repeated punches and attacks by the Spirit. William split off a bit of metal from his surfboard, morphing it into his sword–which looked oddly blunt, and not sharp enough to cut warm butter–, slamming into the Spirit's metal armor, making a few dents into the futuristic metal, yet getting no reaction other than growing anger.

The Spirit threw an open-palmed strike at William, only for it to stop mid-air, as if an invisible barrier had been placed between him and the Spirit. “Something wrong?” he asked when the screen twisted into an even angrier expression. William was completely and utterly toying with it.

“Alright, I’ve dilly-dallied enough, let’s pull a trick out of my sleeve,” William said, cracking his neck before splitting his surfboard into two platforms under his feet. As he let up his control over the Spirit’s hand, it shot past him, blowing his hair out of his face. He flew along the length of the Spirit’s arm, using his blessing to artificially sharpen his blade while artfully not losing concentration over his surfboard.

He stabbed the blade into the metal armor, running his sword down the side of the arm and cutting it open, sending sparks and stray wires out of the gap he made in the futuristic metal. The Spirit let out a distorted scream, its expression shifting to that of agony before returning to fury. It grabbed at William, only to miss–he was way too quick. Its size was both an aid and a detriment.

A double-edged sword.

William manipulated the silver of his sword, shifting it to split into segments connected by a chain–exactly as he had done when he was fighting the Tornado Spirit a few months ago. He pulled the handle of the sword back, pulling the segments away from the Spirit along with it. Then, using the segmented sword like a whip, he struck the Spirit. It cried out as more of its armor was cut, and William grinned with a strange mix of maliciousness and enjoyment. He continued to whip the Spirit, avoiding its attacks while doing tricks in the air–backflips, loops, the works.

After a few minutes of William essentially playing with his food, he whipped his sword once more, wrapping the sharp segments around the Spirit’s head. “Game over,” William said, pulling on his sword, the edges of the sword segments slicing into and opening the Spirit’s head–beheading it in a single

movement. In the last few seconds of its life–if it could be considered to ever have a life–x's flashed on the screen in place of its expression, its head crashing onto the street below.

William flew onto the Spirit's shoulder, a geyser of oil shooting up from the opening of the Spirit's neck. He extended his arms, the dark black liquid mixing with the now pouring rain, staining his clothes as he embraced it. He grinned, his light brown hair getting doused and becoming a shade of black that rivaled the hair of his boyfriend, Yujiro.

After the Spirit had dissolved, William gracefully descended, reformed the pole to the best of his abilities, and sheathed his sword. He walked up to the other two Shamans, pushing his hair back, wiping most of the oil off his face. "Hope you weren't too offended by me killing your big bro, RT," William said to the robot. If RT could have rolled its eyes, it would have. Ace rolled his eyes in RT's name, as the automaton turned around and resumed the walk back to the Shaman Base. Ace followed suit.

William threw his hands up in overexaggerated exasperation. "Oh come on, you had to admit I looked cool doing that! I know I did, you won't convince me otherwise!" William jogged up after them, seemingly unaffected by the state of himself or his oil-soaked clothing. Soon, however, the rain washed out the rest of what William hadn't wiped away.

Ace used his staff to create an umbrella made of white fire, evaporating any water drops that dared to try to rain down on him. RT was simply unaffected by the rain, walking as if it didn't exist. Compared to the fight that had just ensued, the rest of the walk back to the Shaman Base was uneventful, Ace taking a

moment to just… *breathe*. Relaxing was a luxury, especially after discovering only an hour ago that Liberation existed.

"RT, you recorded that fight, right?" William asked as they stepped through the apartment door, walking onto the Shaman Base. A large handful of Shamans were in sight, bantering and talking about whatever.

"AFFIRMATIVE, THE BRAWL BETWEEN YOU AND THE FEAR-BORN SPIRIT OF THE SINGULARITY WAS RECORDED DUE TO MY AUTOMATIC RECORDATION SYSTEM," RT responded.

"Perfect, we're showing the youngin's; they deserve to see greatness, even if it's only through projection and not with their own real eyes." He gestured for RT to follow him, all of them temporarily distracted by the recent battle from the knowledge that Liberation was real. Once William had gathered all the Shamans' attention–and put off their numerous questions about his state–he began projecting his fight through RT.

"Not to flex or anything, but it was pretty easy beating that Spirit," William said, flexing his biceps playfully.

Yujiro looked like he had stars for pupils, while Anatoly and Heidi looked largely unimpressed, the latter more so than the former. Ace rolled his eyes again, though a small smile played on his lips. He was just about to turn around to go back to the Shaman Base, but–

Chapter 20: New Challenger

“C’mon, we need to go to Theodora.” William spoke with the lightest twinge of worry and urgency as he dragged Ace by his wrist, clutching his arm tightly in a firm grip. Ace stumbled and tripped over his own feet as he tried to catch up with William, the tight grip on his wrist making pain ripple through his muscles. It surprised him how strong William’s hold was.

William burst through the door to Theodora’s office the way someone would in a soap opera when they found out their spouse was cheating: Overdramatic. “Theodora, this is urgent! We need to drop everything!” William exclaimed, his hand still holding Ace’s wrist.

Theodora was sitting with a full teacup in her hand, steam floating into the air like smoke from her cigarettes. The cup was made of fine china, pearly white with a delicately painted grapevine pattern. A tea kettle floated in the air, on top of a ball of light shaped to look like a stovetop. She had the tea cup almost to her wrinkled lips, but she paused as William entered, letting the cup down to rest on the ground.

“Last time you burst through like this, claiming something was urgent, the shower water wasn’t hot enough,” Theodora said dryly, the same tone she had when mentioning the Shaman who had been dared to nail himself to a wall and did it.

“I am *serious* this time, Theodora!” William said, bringing a sense of deja vu to the room as he let go of Ace’s wrist to throw his arms up, expressing displeasure. Theodora only rolled her eyes, bringing the teacup up to take a sip of it once more. A moment passed as William searched his mind for the words to describe what he had seen. He chose a simple statement. “Liberation is back,” he announced. Those words sent shock through Theodora.

Shock. Something she hadn’t felt in a long time, and not nearly at this intensity. It was enough to make her drop her teacup, the fine china shattering on the trapdoor floor.

“*What?”* she asked. Ace had never seen Theodora show any emotion other than stoicism and seriousness, so hearing the mix of panic and shock in her voice spiked Ace’s fear of Liberation.

“Ace and I found the emblem in the mental hospital you sent us to. Freshly carved,” William explained “Either it was a crazy coincidence that a rogue Shaman carved the exact symbol of Liberation onto a concrete wall for no reason, or, more likely, Liberation is still active and thriving.”

“Okay, I’m hearing all this Liberation talk, and I *still* have no clue what their deal is! Can one of you *please* explain?” Ace asked, his eyes darting between William and Theodora. William looked to Theodora, letting her explain. Theodora sighed as she began to speak.

“Liberation is an organized group of Rogue Shamans that make deals with Spirits for great abilities. What they give in exchange is usually the promise of killing Shamans or destroying Shaman Society.” Theodora formed china shards that once made a pearly white teacup into a ball of light and let it ascend into

the air. “I *thought* the Shaman Society got rid of them for good, roughly sixty years before you were born. However, it seems some fragments of them reformed and have started operating in the shadows again.”

“I SUPPOSE THAT WOULD EXPLAIN THE RECENT DISAPPEARANCE OF A GROUP OF LEVEL C SHAMANS NEAR THE WESTERN ATTRACTION TOWN OF OL’ ACES’ WHERE YOU SENT THEM,” said RT-781 in its monotone robotic voice from behind William and Ace as it walked into the office, having finished presenting the recording of William’s fight to the other Shamans.

Theodora only rubbed her head, rising from her sitting position on the floor. “We need to stop Liberation as quickly as possible. Thus, I have decided to send you two, plus Yujiro, because I know William won’t go anywhere without him, to find out who or what killed that search team.” Theodora took the kettle and made it into a ball of light, the room vastly more illuminated as the pure light ascended and lingered near the ceiling. She waved her hand at them dismissively, shooing them away.

William and Ace nodded in sync, turning and walking past RT-781 to find Yujiro and get on with the mission. They found Yujiro reading a book on one of the benches placed sporadically on the Shaman Base, probably taking his mind off the Fear Spirit of Death. Ace had a gut feeling that his concern over the Fear Spirit of Death–which was still out there somewhere–was going to be taking a backseat while Liberation was on the loose.

“Yujiro, come on, we’ve got a mission!” William called out from a handful of feet away. Yujiro looked up, his smile widening as he saw William. He

eagerly came over, taking William's hand in his and walking alongside William and Ace as they left the Shaman Base.

"So," Yujiro started as they exited onto the city block, finding William's car and entering. "Where are we going?" He finished the question as he sat down in the passenger seat of William's car. William looked away from the steering wheel to make eye contact with Yujiro's emerald green eyes.

"Remember that Wild Western town–Ol' Aces–we passed while driving a while back, and you told me how much you wanted to go there?" William asked Yujiro, whose smile grew and shone brightly with excitement. Without waiting for words of confirmation, William nodded. "We're going there." Ace sat in the back seat, sitting out of the conversation both literally and figuratively.

The car jolted forward, suddenly accelerating, though William's hands weren't on the wheel, and his left leg was resting on top of the other. For a moment, Ace was confused, then he realized he didn't hear the engine whirring, nor were the displays on the car lit up. The car was powered off, yet it was moving as if it were on.

William was using his Blessing to move the car around, instead of driving it normally. *He's flexing on us*, Ace thought to himself as the car drove down a busy street. For the first time in a while, Ace saw people on the street, people in suits, in dresses, in gym clothes, in casual clothes, walking together, walking alone. Ace realized only then how taxing it was being completely isolated from the rest of humanity while on his missions, and how much he craved social interaction with someone that wasn't a Shaman.

Ace stared out the window as people whizzed by, and before he knew it, he was at a tourist attraction. It was a town designed to replicate a typical Hollywood representation of the Wild West. Saloons, bars, buildings held up by flimsy wooden beams, horses roaming dirt roads, and most importantly, the employees all wearing cowboy and cowgirl outfits.

Ace could tell this was going to be a *wild* time.

God, William's stupid humor was rubbing off on him.

Chapter 21: Tumbleweeds, Tussles, and Traitors

The town smelled like the past. A mix of cigarettes, whiskey, dust, and horse manure made it seem as though they were really *in* the Wild West. Cardboard tumbleweeds propped up against buildings, a blistering hot sun beat down, horses neighed and trotted past on dirt roads, employees dressed as cowboys, and the sound of harmonicas and old-fashioned upright pianos echoed from inside wooden buildings.

A man sitting on a barrel at an intersection of two dirt roads played a harmonica, an old soup can in front of him with spare change of varying amounts. The main attraction was right behind the harmonica-playing cowboy: The Saloon.

The Saloon was wooden, like all the surrounding buildings. It had a fresh brown coat of paint, and a large sign on top of the building read “The Big Oldie”. William led the way through the Western town, entering through the swinging doors that are typical of a Hollywood set. Ace and Yujiro followed, finding themselves on the inside of the two-story saloon.

The first floor had lots of occupied circular wooden tables, a bar at the far side of the room, and a large upright piano pushed up against the right-hand

corner. A bartender stood behind the bar, polishing a glass cup with a white cloth. The stairs to the second floor were blocked off by a red curtain and a sign reading “EMPLOYEES ONLY”.

“Let’s split up. We need to find the Spirit or Rogue Shaman that killed our Shaman colleagues,” William said, his eyes trailing all over the saloon. Yujiro nodded, as the three Shamans went to opposite sides of the saloon to look for anything suspicious. William went over to the bar, ordered a drink, and sat, blending into the environment. Ace walked over to the upright piano, trying and failing to blend in as William did.

Yujiro, however, stayed put, his eyes falling on a man sitting alone in the middle of the room. The man looked to be in his late thirties. His face was gruff and stoic. A scar ran down his cheek starting from above his eyebrow, a streak of light red against his tanned skin. His eyes were blue, bluer than a clear sky.

He wore a blue and white-striped button-up shirt, light brown dungarees, and a belt wielding the holster for a revolver. His black prosthetic legs tucked into cowboy boots with small decorative stars stitched on at the heel. He had a banjo strapped to his back and an almost empty glass of whiskey in his left hand shone from the light pouring in through the windows.

Yujiro looked up, locating the others in his group. He activated one of the etchings on his katana. He felt the Blessing weave itself through the handle and into his blood. His heartbeat changed rhythm. He always got his rhythm reset when applying a new Blessing to himself, the disorientation enough to make it difficult to switch between Blessings rapidly. This Blessing allowed him to

speak into the minds of others. *I found someone suspicious. I have a gut feeling about him.* Yujiro spoke in his mind, directing the message to William and Ace.

Ace recognized Yujiro's voice in his head, and, like William, craned his head to look over at Yujiro. Yujiro nodded his head to the man in the cowboy outfit, who mysteriously stood and began to leave the saloon. The prosthetic legs propelled him forward as he left, boots stomping against the wood floorboards.

The three Shamans followed the cowboy into the dirt street mostly devoid of people. After a few paces, the man turned around and faced the three Shamans, drawing a Peacemaker revolver from his holster, pointing it right at Yujiro's heart.

"You know who I am, don't ya?" the man asked, still holding the gun tightly in his left hand. He had a thick accent, one you'd expect from a man ripped right out of the Wild West. He glared down at the three Shamans with surprising height, his icy blue eyes sending a shiver down Yujiro's spine. "You're a Shaman. So am I. Only, we aren't the same, in many ways. I left Shaman Society, but you remain there. You may have heard of me. I am Cassidy Smithson." Cassidy pulled back the hammer of his Peacemaker with a click, rotating the cylinder to align a bullet with the barrel of the gun, ready for firing. William, Yujiro, and Ace drew their weapons, holding them in front of themselves. "Let me guess, you work for Liberation?" William asked, his sword held at his waist as Cassidy chuckled dryly, his voice gravelly.

"Bullseye, partner," Cassidy turned his Peacemaker to show the logo of Liberation etched onto the barrel of the iron gun. "And before you ask, I do

have a deal with a Spirit, a decently powerful one at that. Level B." A Spirit formed behind Cassidy. It looked like a tan brown horse with dead white eyes, only its mane flowed through the air like it was being dragged through water. It let out a noise that sounded like a drowned neigh, blood pouring out of its jaw once it did.

"The Fear Spirit of *Horses*? Why'd you make a deal with that one?" Ace asked, gripping his staff tighter. He had advanced enough in his training to consistently and effectively create and manipulate fire with his bare hands, though he still felt more confident with the brass staff in hand, the topaz orb pointed directly at Cassidy.

Cassidy only shrugged at the question, nonchalant and carefree despite the weapons pointing at him. "Felt on brand," he said. The others had to admit, from what they knew of Cassidy and his apparent obsession with the Wild West, it did feel on brand.

"You killed those Shamans, didn't you?" William asked, holding his sword tighter.

Cassidy wagged his finger and *tsk-tsk*-ed at William, shaking his head slowly in disapproval. "'Killed' isn't the right word. You see, those Shamans were *liberated* from the cruel and unjust system of Shaman Society, *liberated* from the harsh truths of life, *liberated* from the horrors of man. I don't kill, I *liberate*. I am *Liberation*."

Yujiro stepped forward, a challenging look in his eyes. He was ready to avenge those killed by Cassidy, or rather, "liberated". William put his hand on

Yujiro's shoulder, stopping him. "Don't. I can do it," he said, his protective words only loud enough for the four Shamans to hear.

"No, William," Yujiro said firmly. "I know you want to protect me, and I know *why* you want to protect me, but there are some battles *I* need to face." Yujiro's words seemed to upset William, but he bit his tongue and respected Yujiro's words, stepping back and letting Yujiro challenge Cassidy. The two were in a standoff for a moment, until the sound of a bullet firing and a katana slicing echoed down the dirt road and off the buildings.

Chapter 22: Duel

Ace looked on in awe as Yujiro cut the bullet Cassidy fired clean in half, the split pieces falling to the ground. “Impressive,” was all Cassidy had to say before cocking the hammer back again and firing another time, attempting to catch Yujiro off guard. The bullet whizzed through the air.

Four bullets left.

Yujiro counted in his mind, dodging the bullet–which narrowly grazed his shirt. He dashed forward to close the distance, activating a Blessing with his katana. An etching near the handle of his sword glowed a golden yellow, and he felt his legs pump with adrenaline at a rate beyond normal human capacity. He suddenly got a burst of speed from the newly activated Blessing, closing distance on Cassidy.

Cassidy fired again, Yujiro activating William’s Blessing, Metal Control, to make it drop.

Three bullets left.

The bullet dropped down, all the momentum it generated coming to a halt, making it descend onto the dirt road under their feet. The Horse Spirit neighed and leapt over Cassidy, its hoof almost colliding with Yujiro’s face. He barely had time to dodge the Spirit’s unanticipated attack before another bullet came flying out of Cassidy’s Peacemaker.

Two bullets left.

This time, Yujiro wasn't so lucky with dodging. The bullet grazed his upper leg, cutting his pants and scraping open his skin. Yujiro gritted his teeth as warm, red, sticky blood poured from the wound on his thigh.

He switched Blessings, a forest green etching glowing on his sword. He healed his thigh, the skin stitching itself back together seamlessly and the wound fully closing. The muscle ached, crying out to his body painfully, but he pushed himself further. Cassidy cocked back the hammer, and, this time, he aimed properly. The sight was pointed right between Yujiro's eyes. Cassidy pulled the trigger.

One bullet left.

Yujiro teleported behind Cassidy, hitting the back of his head with the pommel of his katana, making Cassidy call out in pain and stagger. Yujiro didn't miss a beat, copying Ace's technique and setting his katana blade ablaze. He swung his katana. It would've connected with the side of Cassidy's waist if not for the Horse Spirit, who stomped down on the blade, knocking his katana to the ground.

Cassidy dashed away, making distance and whistling to the Spirit. He fired another bullet, smoke billowing from the barrel of the revolver, the bullet ricocheting off the saloon and falling uselessly on the ground.

Empty. The cylinder was fresh out of bullets.

Cassidy jumped into the air, as if he were jumping onto something, though there was nothing to jump on. That was, until the Horse Spirit manifested under him, and he mounted the Spirit on a saddle. The horse began to gallop in a

circle around the Shamans as Cassidy holstered his Peacemaker, unstrapped his banjo and began to play it.

Red musical notes flew out of the strings as Cassidy strummed them, each one corresponding to the note played on the banjo. The musical notes flew quickly at Yujiro, whizzing past. This was Cassidy's Blessing. Yujiro weaved and dodged as best he could, though the notes came faster and faster as Cassidy played the banjo.

One note came before Yujiro could dodge, catching his arm. The red note matched the blood that began to come out of the cut on his arm, the drops of crimson flowing down his upper arm and staining the dirt road under him. Yujiro slashed his katana, cutting a note clean in half, making it dissolve, just as a Spirit would. The onslaught of musical notes from the banjo continued near-endlessly.

Yujiro cut through most of the notes, making them dissolve and disappear as quickly as they appeared, though some managed to slam into or slice Yujiro. Slowly but surely, as bruises and cuts formed on Yujiro, he inched closer and closer to Cassidy, the distance shrinking between the two.

Cassidy brought his hand into the air, readying to bring it down and strum the banjo. He didn't get the chance as Yujiro sliced his wrist with the blade and blood spurted through the air. Cassidy gritted his teeth and bit back a yelp of pain. He dropped his banjo onto the ground, gripping his injured wrist. Blood painted onto his palm and spilt over, dripping onto the ground.

Yujiro dashed back, reforming the distance between the two. He brought the blade of the katana to his lips and ran his tongue along the edge of the

blade, picking up Cassidy's blood. His tongue retreated into his mouth, ingesting the crimson red blood. Yujiro's irises flashed from emerald to the color of the red notes played from Cassidy's banjo before returning to their natural green color.

"Music manipulation. That's a decent Blessing, Cassidy," Yujiro said as he flicked his katana. A new etching made itself clear on the blade, near the tip. Cassidy's eyes widened, and he continued to grit his teeth as he held his wrist tighter. He yanked his blood stained banjo off the ground and whistled to the Horse Spirit.

"This ain't over yet!" Cassidy yelled as the Spirit galloped away with Cassidy. William stepped forward, ready to chase after Cassidy, which he would have done if not for Yujiro stopping him with a hand on his chest.

"Don't," Yujiro said, watching as Cassidy made his escape. "We need Liberation to know that they aren't up against any weak Shamans. They'll know not to underestimate us if we let Cassidy leave."

William opened his mouth to protest, but shut it, muttering a curse under his breath as Cassidy left their view. "If you say so…" He paused for a moment, looking to where Cassidy was before moving past the horizon. "I still think we should've caught or killed him."

A shudder went down Ace's spine as William mentioned killing Cassidy. The way he said it with no regard for Cassidy's life made Ace question the heroism of Shaman Society. The moral turmoil he felt when he came upon the dead Rogue Shaman returned, planting seeds of doubt in Ace's mind.

Chapter 23: Search Team

For the million-and-first time, Ace was summoned to Theodora's office for a mission. Theodora sat tailor style on the flooring of her office as the announcement for Ace to enter her office echoed through the Shaman Base. She had many reasons to pick him for the missions she did. He showed his reliability, he had grown powerful in a short amount of time with no signs of stopping, and he had connections to William before joining Shaman Society, all things pointing to him becoming a great Shaman.

Theodora awaited Ace's entry; in the meantime she took one of the golden glowing orbs that floated in the air and de-morphed it back into what it was, a cigarette. She removed a lighter from a pocket on her ash-covered toga and put the cigarette to her lips, lighting it and inhaling the smoke. At that moment, Ace entered her office.

Theodora morphed her cigarette back into a glowing orb and pushed it up into the air. "Ace, as you know, we need to find Liberation. The best way to do that is by locating their base of operations; thus, we will be sending you with four others, who have already been selected, to enter a forest we deem likely for housing their base." Ace nodded as Theodora talked. "Oh, and you'll be needing this." Theodora de-morphed a different orb of light, which became a walkie talkie, and tossed it to Ace, who fumbled and just barely caught it.

Ace gripped the walkie talkie tightly in his hand, quickly leaving Theodora's office. Outside, he saw a group of four other Shamans, who looked to be around his age, standing near the exit to the Shaman Base. The four Shamans were waving, beckoning him over.

Ace assumed these were the Shamans Theodora had mentioned, so he waved back and jogged over to them. "You must be Ace, right? Theodora mentioned you," one of the Shamans said to Ace once he was in earshot. "Anyways, let's not waste any time and get moving," he added before Ace could respond. The three other Shamans nodded along with the first, who led the way through the door.

The five of them left the Shaman Base and got into a waiting car. They drove for a little while, parking near the edge of the city and the border of a forest. All of them got out of the car and entered the forest.

"Everyone have their walkie talkies ready?" the leading Shaman asked, everyone responding with a 'yes' or some variation of it. Ace suggested they split up so they could cover more ground in the forest and be able to find Liberation quicker, to which they all agreed.

The forest was dense, with swampy pools of green water and moss hanging from the branches of the trees. Over the walkie talkies, the other Shamans were bantering with each other about random trivial things, one mentioning how he had surgery and got a metal hip when they were a kid.

Minutes went by, the only sounds reaching Ace's ears were the idle talking of the Shamans on the walkie talkies, the eerie sounds of bugs and animals of

the forest, and his own footsteps rippling through the green murky water of the marsh.

He had mostly tuned out the other Shamans, that is, until he heard the panicky voice of one of them interrupting the others. "*Uh, guys? I think I heard something–"* After a pause and some rustling, they spoke again. "*Oh my god, is that–"* They were interrupted by the sound of a gunshot and a terrifying blood curdling scream. The scream ended with another gunshot.

A familiar voice, though not the one of the Shaman, spoke ominously on the walkie talkie. "*Liberated*," whispered Cassidy. Liberation had found out they were looking for them, and Cassidy had killed the Shaman. The sound of Cassidy reloading his Peacemaker echoed over the walkie talkie, and he spoke again. "*Say your prayers, boys. You won't be able to say them at all soon.*" His voice was eerily calm for just having killed a man, and his words only added to the bad feeling forming in Ace's gut.

Another scream came from the walkie talkie. The voice screaming changed from that of a young man to an old one–as if aging through the years of life in an instant–, then it faded into nothingness, the voice stopping entirely. The next one didn't get a chance to scream before an onslaught of bullets. Now, only Ace and the leading Shaman were left alive from their original group. "*Oh my god—what's happening?–Please–,*" the leading Shaman pleaded, but his cries were cut short by the sound of bones snapping.

"*Checking, are all of them dead?*" asked a gruff voice. It definitely wasn't Cassidy's voice, but Ace couldn't pin a name to it. The voice had a hint of an

accent to it, though deciphering where it was from was the least of Ace's concerns.

"*A-all done, Gunnar,*" a young male voice responded. The voice was shaky, almost scared or frightened. The voice belonged to a boy who sounded to be around Ace's age. It also sounded vaguely familiar. It seemed none of them realized Ace was hearing what they were saying, so he stayed silent.

"*Affirmative, Gunnar,*" a woman's voice said. She sounded much more confident and cold with her words, vastly different from the boy's voice. The woman sounded to be in her late twenties or early thirties, the words she spoke emotionless and cold as ice.

"*Who are our two newbies?*" asked the only voice Ace could name for certain, Cassidy.

"*Those two are Tommy and Hecate,*" replied the gruff and middle-aged man, named Gunnar. *Tommy*, Ace thought, the name was familiar to him. He felt as though he should know it, but his mind only drew blanks. "*They have exceptional Blessings that make Liberation more powerful than Theodora could ever imagine. Newbies wouldn't be a term to properly encapsulate them.*"

"*You sure have a lot of confidence, how can you be so certain about them?*" asked Cassidy.

"*To give you an idea, Tommy here has Age Manipulation. He can accelerate or reverse the aging process of anything. He can rust metals, wilt plants, and most powerfully of all, skeletonize humans just by the touch of his hand. Hecate, on the other hand, is skilled at hiding. She can make herself*

entirely invisible to the naked eye, perfect for,say, planting a mole into Shaman Society."

Ace's panic was growing. Gunnar sounded powerful, and, judging by how he talked to the other members of Liberation, he was the one who ran it. Not only that, not knowing Gunnar's Blessing, if he had one, caused Ace to imagine many equally terrible and dangerous possibilities. Ace rushed through the marshy forest to get back to the car.

Liberation had a powerful gunslinger with Musical Manipulation, a boy Ace's age who could kill a man in seconds with only a touch, a woman that could make herself completely invisible on command, and someone that ruled over them with presumably more power than all of them.

Liberation just upped their game.

Chapter 24: A Grave Introduction

Ace recklessly sped well over the speed limit down roads and streets, driving to the abandoned apartment complex with the door leading to Shaman Society. In minutes, he had arrived at the broken and worn building that had become his home. Ace rushed out of the car that was not his own, running into the apparently deserted building.

Dashing down the hallway of the apartment complex, he came across the familiar door: '*101.*' Ace's trembling and sweaty palm twisted the brass doorknob of the wooden door and pushed it open, stepping into the bright sun and cool breeze of the Shaman Base. Ace's panicked and worried eyes scanned the Shaman Base for anyone he recognized.

Unrecognized face after face filled his vision as he skimmed over the Shamans of the area. Then he saw *the* most recognizable face of all, William, who was chatting with Yujiro, Heidi, and Anatoly. "William!" shouted Ace as he saw the other Shamans, making William turn his head to the call.

"What's the matter?" William asked as Ace sprinted over, out of breath.

"Liberation..," Ace responded breathily, taking quick shallow breaths in between his words. "They… killed my… killed my group," Ace managed to choke out between exhausted pants.

William, who had looked calm and collected before, now showed a hint of fear on his face, which was rare. He turned to Yujiro, Anatoly, and Heidi. “I’m going to go out to where Ace was searching and find those dead Shamans. If there’s nothing we can do to save them, the least we can do is get the bodies back to their families.”

William gave a quick goodbye kiss to Yujiro’s cheek before leading Ace outside the Shaman Base and into the apartment complex. William escorted Ace into his car, the two driving at a reasonable pace down the street until finally arriving at the forest edge. William and Ace exited the car, stepping warily into the marshy forest. The forest smelt of flesh, rotten or rotting human flesh. It was a terrifying smell, especially when completely secluded in a marsh dense with tall trees, the leaves of which barely let sunlight peek through to the muddy ground.

It didn’t take many paces of stomping through mud and bog to find something that made Ace nearly vomit and made the hairs on the back of William’s neck rise. Hanging by mossy green vines tangled in trees were the remains of what looked to be four skeletons, their bones spelling out “LIBERATED”, vines and plants weaved around them, filling empty spaces and gaps between the bones. Their bodies taken by nature. One of them was pierced by multiple bullet holes. A second one had a single bullet hole through the skull, right between the empty eye sockets.

They weren’t just any random skeletons either, the only intact one, which made up the ‘I’ of the word, had a metal hip in place of the bone. Liberation had slaughtered the four Shamans for what? To make a statement? A warning?

What did it mean? Ace felt the moral turmoil racking his brain tilt more into black-and-white territory, though killing real living *people* still didn't sit right with him.

Ace felt bile climbing up his throat, begging to be let out. Ace gagged on the stinging liquid, and he covered his mouth with his hand, forcing the horrid liquid back down his throat.

"Age Manipulation," William said to himself as he stared at one of skeletons hanging from the vines, he brought his finger to the femur bone of the complete skeleton, tracing his finger along it, picking up dust. "No one could have skeletonized *and* collected dust that quickly without it," he added, rubbing the dust between his fingers. "We need to tell Theodora. A person with Age Manipulation is very, *very* dangerous."

William quickly ushered Ace away from the skeletons dangling and entangled in the vines, but no matter how long Ace looked away, he couldn't help the guilt that made his stomach twist into knots. He felt responsible for their deaths, or at least, for allowing it to happen.

Even as the two ventured back, Ace's mind stayed behind, lingering on the four who had died, the four Shamans that could've done so much with their lives if it weren't for Liberation. William removed the skeletons from the vines, solemnly putting them in the trunk of the car to be returned to their families, something that'd be Theodora's responsibility. The drive back to the Shaman Base felt shorter for Ace as his mind wandered in grief.

In what felt like the blink of an eye, William and Ace were back at the Shaman Base, though something felt off. Something bad had happened while

they were gone. William noticed it immediately; he saw all the Shamans huddled around something or someone.

“What’s the matter?” William asked, bringing Ace along so they could see what everyone was huddled around. The circle of people made a path to the center, where Theodora stood, holding an envelope and a letter. “What’s that?” he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

“Liberation,” Theodora said simply, though grimly, looking up. “They know where we are. We were sent this letter only minutes after you two left.” She handed William the ripped envelope. The envelope had been sealed in imprinted red wax with the logo of Liberation, the eye with an S for a pupil.

William hesitated for a second, biting the inside of his cheek before opening the already-ripped envelope. Inside was a sinister message, the words of it spelt out using clippings from newspapers and magazines.

DEAR SHAMAN SOCIETY, IN TWO WEEKS TIME, WE AT LIBERATION WILL DETONATE AN EXPLOSIVE IN A CROWD OF PEOPLE GATHERED FOR A CONCERT. I WISH YOU THE BEST OF LUCK IN SAVING THEM, FOR MANY WILL DIE IF YOU FAIL. AND IF YOU FAIL, THEIR BLOOD WILL BE ON YOUR HANDS..

REGARDS, GUNNAR.

The letter made a shiver run along Ace’s spine as William read it aloud. Murmurs and whispers came from the crowd of people. Whispers about

whether it was real. Whispers about who and how they were going to stop it. Whispers about the casualties for inaction.

The sun had already begun to set, thus making Theodora send everyone to their dorm rooms to sleep. “We will discuss this in the morning with fresh minds,” she had said as she shooed everyone to their dorm rooms. So that’s what Ace did–he went to sleep, guilt-ridden and in moral turmoil.

Chapter 25: Liberation I

The trees around Ace curved inwards, their black and brown bark and nearly pitch-black canopies trapping Ace inside the dense boggy forest. Fog blocked his view as mud and bog trapped his feet. He felt powerless as he struggled to pull his feet out of the mud. He was scared and unable to move.

Screams echoed through the forest, coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once. The screams overlapped and repeated themselves, and Ace recognized them as the screams of the Shamans on his team who had died. Their screams made his ears bleed, the warm crimson liquid running down the side of his face.

Ace pivoted and looked around him to the best of his ability, but the dense wood trees and thick fog made it impossible to see three feet in front of him. His heart pounded in his chest and goosebumps ran along his skin, making it feel colder than ice. Then, Ace's frantic eyes fell on a familiar figure walking through the fog.

Cassidy.

His cowboy outfit made him stand out in the marsh, and he even walked on top of it, seemingly unaffected by the quicksand effect it had on Ace. "You couldn't save them," Cassidy said, Peacemaker revolver in hand.

Emerging and climbing out of the marsh were four skeletons, skeletons he somehow knew were the Shamans that had died on the mission. “Why didn’t you save us, Ace?” they all asked in unison, repeating it over and over as they loomed over him.

Sweat poured down from Ace’s brow and back as it happened. He covered his ears to try and drown out the noise, the blood painting his palms and wrists. “I’m sorry! Please!” Ace shouted and begged as the skeletons of the Shamans continued to ask him why he didn’t save them. Tears of blood began to pour from his eyes, and he heard the hammer of Cassidy’s revolver cocked back. Then the sound of the gun firing and hitting–

Ace woke up.

It was just a nightmare. Ace panted, having jolted up from fright. He was out of breath and covered in sweat. He checked his ears with his hand. Bloodless. He wiped his forehead with his sweaty palms, catching his breath and mumbling curses to himself. He checked the clock in the dim room. *2:06 AM*.

Ace lied back down, shut his eyes, and tried his best to fall asleep again.

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Ace awoke again at a more reasonable time, having slept comparatively peacefully after his horrific nightmare. Over the intercom, Theodora spoke. “ALL PROFESSORS AND LEVEL X SHAMANS, PLEASE COME TO MY OFFICE SO WE MAY DISCUSS THE THREAT MADE BY LIBERATION.” Ace remained in his bed, sprawled out under the sheets.

It made sense he wasn’t invited to the meeting, he was only a Level B Shaman. Though being told he couldn’t go to the meeting only made him want to go more. Thus, he brought himself out of bed and got dressed, fixing up his hair as best he could before exiting his dorm room.

As he shut the door behind him, the warm lighting in the hallway shone softly on his skin. Ace looked up and down the hall of the dormitory, making sure that no one was watching. Once he was sure no one had their eyes on him, he snuck down the stairs.

Ace walked carefully over the carpeted steps of the stairs, avoiding the ones that creaked like a wailing ghost under the weight of footsteps. Soon enough, he reached the bottom floor without being spotted, and, looking out the window, he saw the last of the Level X Shamans entering Theodora’s office.

He glanced around the Shaman Grounds through the window of the dormitory, taking note of all the Shamans that were visible from his vantage point. Most of them were idly chatting or training; a few ate meals from the cafeteria, sitting on the ground and taking in dust on their pants.

Ace double and triple checked his surroundings before taking a deep breath and tiptoeing past the idling Shamans scattered around the Grounds. The sand

beneath the soles of his bare feet crunched and cracked as he walked, too quiet for anyone to hear.

Ace managed to cross the Grounds without being noticed, leading him to press his back against the wall of Theodora's office so he could eavesdrop. He put his ear against the wooden wall, barely managing to make out the sound of voices on the other side.

"He could very well be bluffing, Theodora," the gruff and battle-worn Anatoly said. "He might be lying so he can be undisturbed somewhere else," he added.

"It is a gamble we must take, unfortunately. If he isn't bluffing, hundreds if not thousands will die when we could've easily stopped him," Theodora countered, the concern and worry in her voice not going unnoticed by Ace and those in the meeting.

"Why don't we send a portion of us to the concert to stop the possible terrorist attack Gunnar is threatening? Then we can send another portion out to scout for the others of Liberation in case they're bluffing?" William asked, interrupting Anatoly, who was trying to make another point on top of his first.

"All in favor of William's plan, say 'aye'," Theodora said, a blend of voices from the Level X Shamans and professors responding with their 'ayes'. "Then it's settled. We will send one party of our most reliable Shamans to the concert as well as a second one to scout out for Liberation. This meeting is adjourned. Rest up and keep your skills sharp; we'll need to be at our best if we're going to stop Liberation before they can do any major damage."

Bright colorful lights, the almost sickening smell of alcohol, the muffled excited shouts and screams of clueless fans in the audience, the sticky concrete floor covered in spilt liquids, and the freezing cold air on his lips and tongue. The concert was a cacophony that overstimulated Ace's senses, making his head pound with sharp pain.

At Ace's side were RT-781, Yujiro, William, Heidi, Anatoly, and finally, Theodora. The seven of them were the selected reliable Shamans sent to the concert to stop the terrorist attack that Liberation had supposedly planned. Theodora had gotten them backstage, which helped lessen the overwhelming mixture of sounds and sights from the concert, which was about halfway through at this point with no show or sign of Liberation.

"Man, this concert sure is tempestuous," William said suddenly, breaking the almost silence that flooded the space between Ace and him. Ace shot him a quizzical look, which fell into a 'seriously?' one when William responded with "It's my word of the day."

Despite having searched for hours trying to find this 'explosive' planted by Liberation, none of them found anything. They were all sitting backstage, having assumed that Liberation had bluffed, like Anatoly said.

“Well, look who showed up,” said a voice that was only partly familiar to Ace. All of them looked up to see an older man with gray and white hair streaked with its former black color. His eyes were sharp and colored a gray that was eerily similar to Anatoly’s. His right arm was entirely missing, the sleeve that would’ve held it flowing freely through the breeze.

“Gunnar,” Theodora said sharply, as though she were trying to cut Gunnar with her words. All of them were on guard, except for Gunnar, who looked calm and even amused. “Where’s the rest of Liberation, Gunnar?” Theodora asked, her fists at the ready.

“They’ll be here soon enough, Theodora. I just wanted to get here early so I could get a hello in with my brother.”

His brother? Ace thought, glancing around at the others in the group, who, just like Ace, were confused. That was, until Anatoly spoke up, his fists dropping and eyes widening in shock.

“*Mitya?*”

Chapter 26: Liberation II

Anatoly was in shock. His whole world had been shattered into pieces from this sole revelation. The world seemed to move in slow motion as it processed in his mind. He thought his brother had died that day in the blizzard, yet here he was, standing in front of him decades later, on the opposing side of the battle.

He could barely speak, yet he choked out words through his tightened throat. "*Why*?" his voice cracked as he asked the question, something it hadn't done in a very long time. Gunnar, or rather, Dmitri, let a wicked smile cross onto his face.

"Why?" he asked, mocking bafflement yet letting disbelief seep into his tone. "That's what you ask me after *decades*? Well, let me tell you the story of my oh so wonderful brother, and why I hate him with all my heart."

The blizzard raged on, whistling past him and freezing his skin. Dmitri cursed his father, cursed his family, but most of all, cursed his brother for unfairly blaming him. Dmitri had done nothing but care for his brother ever since he was born, and what does he get in return? Cast away and sent to die alone.

He clenched his fist as it held his sleeve, the skin turning from its natural pale to a shade between an icy blue and a sickly gray. He touched the tender skin of his fist with his other hand, which had gone numb, though it burned when he touched the flesh of his frostbitten hand.

He winced at the stinging sensation rippling through his frozen nerves. His hands were trembling, and in a level of pain so excruciating Dmitri didn't think it was possible. Dmitri fell to his knees, burying his legs in the pearly white snow clumped on the ground. He was about to give up, to accept and embrace death.

Until his savior came into view.

She was an old woman, small in stature and old enough to be Dmitri's grandmother, with deep and plentiful wrinkles traced onto her soft face. She reached out a pale hand to Dmitri, bringing him up from the ground and leading him into her cabin, a quaint and small cottage with a small triangular roof and circular outer walls.

As days upon weeks upon months passed, Dmitri survived but at the sacrifice of his frostbitten right arm. A Shaman Mark appeared on the stump as a reminder of the betrayal by his own dearest brother. The sight of the Shaman mark only made him hate Anatoly more and more each day he survived.

In search of a new life, one away from his brother and family, Dmitri moved to America, changing his name to Gunnar Watkins. Months, years, decades. They went by with not a whisper of information about Anatoly or their father, until Gunnar learnt of the Shaman Society. He learned that Anatoly had

also traveled to America and was living the good life, seemingly over his "trauma."

It made him furious.

He wanted nothing else in life except to destroy everything Anatoly had. Anatoly took everything from him, his home, his father, his arm, and the love for his brother, all in one night with a single accusatory finger. Gunnar wanted to return the favor, even if it killed him in the process.

As Gunnar– or Dmitri– recounted his villain origin story, Ace heard the sounds of footsteps coming from all around them. Ace had a gut feeling that the steps came, not from shamans or civilians, but from the others in Liberation, "The Liberators," as Gunnar named them in his monologue.

"Eventually, I came across Cassidy while I was here in the States, and he felt the same grudge against the Shaman Society as I do, though for different reasons. Either way, our goals are one in the same; thus, we rebuilt Liberation." Gunnar looked up, past the Shamans in front of him. Ace's eyes followed his, landing on the people he could only assume were the other Liberators. Gunnar continued speaking as Ace's eyes wandered. "I learned an important lesson after Anatoly betrayed me, one I taught to every last Liberator.

"Everyone is a slave to life, a slave to what it provides you, a slave to the misfortunes it finds joy in granting, a slave to the inevitable pain and suffering it brings forth. Death is not a punishment to man, but a liberation."

Ace's eyes fell on three others–Liberators–who looked more important than the others around them. The first one was Cassidy, suited up in his cowboy

attire and Peacemaker in hand. The second one was who Ace assumed was Hecate; she had long black hair that draped just below her shoulders and a gaze with ocean blue eyes that could make a polar bear frigid. She had an inky black cloak on over her broad shoulders and small frame, the cloth accented with a midnight purple.

The last of the three made Ace's eyes widen with recognition. His big blue eyes looked right back at Ace with that same recognition, only with a hint of fear. He had straight and thin hair that was such a dark brown it bordered on black. The boy, Tommy, was gaunt, and his clothes that looked like they once fit him hung loosely. On his upper arm, mostly hidden by the baggy short sleeve, was a Shaman Mark, one that he didn't have when Ace last saw him.

The boy was Tommy Remington, one of the boys who tormented Ace throughout his high school years, now working for Gunnar as a Liberator. Ace realized it was the same figure whom he'd seen when Yujiro fought the Public Speaking Spirit. Tommy's voice was shaky and with a hint of… relief? "Ace?" he asked, his eyes sporadically glancing between the Liberators, Shamans, and Ace himself.

"Not now, Tommy. Remember, these Shamans killed your parents, they are the bad people. If you can get rid of them, you'll feel better. *Trust me*," said Gunnar, the faux softness not tricking Ace in the slightest. However, that one line connected pieces in Ace's mind like a puzzle. Tommy didn't join Liberation because he wanted to; he joined because Gunnar *made* him through manipulation when he was scared and vulnerable.

Tommy looked conflicted, choosing between the familiarity of Ace or the false safety Gunnar provided. After a long moment of consideration, he made his decision, whispering out his next words. “I’m sorry, Ace.” At the apology, Gunnar grinned, a sadistic and wicked flash of his teeth that made Ace’s stomach twist up in knots out of disgust and loathing.

“William, Heidi, Yujiro, you three go find the explosive and disarm it. We’ll hold off Liberation in the meantime,” Theodora said, getting into an offensive stance, readied for combat. The three nodded, making their escape with no objections from Liberation.

The major Liberation members, as well as the other goons with the Liberation symbol on the chest of their shirts, surrounded them. Only Tommy had a drop of remorse and confliction on his face as he opposed Ace and the other Shamans.

This was going to be a *very* difficult battle.

Chapter 27: Liberation III

The Liberators outnumbered the Shamans. For every Shaman there were two Liberators, and that realization was making Ace's heart pound with grim anticipation. The lesser Liberation members came at the Shamans first, a variety of close range weapons in hand. The rock music blasting away in the background only upped the intensity of the moment, the electric guitar shredding away as the Liberators lunged at the Shamans.

When a Liberator with short brown hair charged at Theodora, Ace realized why she was the strongest Shaman alive now and, possibly, ever. She used her Blessing, Celestialism, for combat, sweeping a beam of light at the charging Liberator's legs, incinerating them in an instant.

The Liberator fell forward screaming in agonizing pain, grabbing at the scorched stumps that once connected to his lower legs. As more Liberators charged them, Theodora gave them the same treatment. One unlucky woman lost an arm and a leg before dying in a burning beam of light.

The beam of light continued its path, burning all the other Liberators unknown to Ace and the rest of the Shamans, leaving only the four they knew by name in front of them. "Each of you, take one of them. I'm going after Gunnar," Theodora said, dashing at Gunnar with surprising speed for her age.

She tackled him, shattering a window and knocking both of them through it to the other side, taking them out of sight. Hecate, in an instant, went invisible, her clothing and skin shifting color like a chameleon changing its scales. Cassidy took fire, aiming down the sight of his Peacemaker and firing right at Anatoly, who absorbed the bullet into one of his Talismans before running at Cassidy, closing the distance between the two.

Ace was about to help Anatoly until he got hit by what felt like a kick to the back of his head, knocking him to the ground. Ace landed on his face, blood dripping out of his nose and onto the concrete under him. Ringing in his ears diluted the sound of the rock music playing around him. Ace rolled onto his back, the sound of a heavy stomp echoing right where his head had been only moments ago. Ace looked over to see who caught him by surprise, only to be met with no one. It took a moment to register in his brain who it was.

Hecate.

Ace sent an inferno of flames upward, hoping to catch Hecate in the blast, or, at the minimum, distract her long enough for Ace to get back on even footing. The flames soared into the air, missing his unseen target. He swiftly jumped to his feet, wiping the blood leaking out of his nostrils using his forearm, smearing the red liquid on his skin.

He scanned the area, seeing RT-781 fighting Tommy and Anatoly duelling Cassidy. He tore his eyes away from the brawls happening in front of him, instead focusing on his own fight. Ace swung his fist aimlessly, missing Hecate entirely.

He felt an elbow jab his stomach, making him stagger back and clutch it with one hand, trying with no avail to ease the pain. Ace's eyes glanced around, hoping he'd manage to spot the invisible Hecate.

He was swept off his feet, landing hard on his back, which knocked the wind right out of his lungs. This time, Ace adapted; he launched fire up into the air above him, catching Hecate in the blast. The flames clung to her unseen skin, dancing in the air and outlining her form.

Hecate screamed, her invisibility dropping as she tried to put out the fire sticking to her like glue. One of the backstage workers, who wasn't a Liberator or Shaman, sprayed the now perceptible Hecate with a fire extinguisher. From his point of view, she was an innocent older woman who had been set ablaze. Her white skin charred black and red from the fire, she fell to the floor, half her face burned horribly. Definitely out of the fight.

Ace turned his attention away from the downed woman, searching for somewhere he could intervene and help. To the side, up against a wall, was RT-781, its body rusted from the oxidization created by Tommy's Age Manipulation. Patches of its metal exoskeleton were green, the once shining copper now dull and corroded.

Both Tommy and Cassidy were now fighting Anatoly. Cassidy was standing back, firing silver bullets at Anatoly from his revolver. Meanwhile, Tommy kept his distance while the bullets soared, missing his punches while taking some from Anatoly. Cassidy stopped firing for a moment, reloading six bullets into the chamber of his gun. He steadied his sight, aiming right at the Russian Shaman, then fired.

The bullet was directed at Anatoly's chest, and it would have connected if Ace hadn't raised a fire wall between the bullet and Anatoly to catch and melt the metal, saving him. Ace dashed over, catching Tommy's wrist with a kick that knocked him to the ground.

He lowered the wall of fire as he tackled Tommy. Ace grabbed his wrists holding the other boy down against the sticky concrete of the backstage. With the colorful lights disorienting Ace's senses it was hard to read Tommy's expression properly, but he could tell the other boy was scared. His hands trembled under Ace's, as a tremor of fear jolted through his body.

Anatoly took the opportunity to close the distance with Cassidy, catching a bullet in a Talisman before throwing it at Cassidy and hitting his hand, making him drop his gun. Anatoly took the opportunity to throw a punch at Cassidy, landing directly on his nose. Cassidy staggered back, clutching his nose, which poured blood like an open faucet. The fight between the two men continued, but Ace's eyes fell back to Tommy, who was still under him.

Tommy stared up at Ace for a moment until speaking. "Ace, I know where the bomb is. Its–" He started to speak, but his words were cut off as Theodora and Gunnar burst through one of the backstage walls. Theodora landed on top of Gunnar, her palm right between his eyes. Her hand glowed a bright yellow, and Gunnar barely managed to grab her wrist and push her hand to the side before a beam of light left her palm.

With his other hand, Gunnar fired his pistol, the bullet whizzing past Theodora's cranium as she got off him. Gunnar continued his merciless onslaught of rounds, the magazine seeming to never empty, a bottomless hold

of ammunition. Theodora cast another beam of light horizontally in front of her, catching and destroying the bullets in the bright golden line.

Theodora pulled the light to her like a rope in tug of war, the golden shine balling up between her hands. She prepared to fire the growing orb, her palms glowing yellow as she charged the light. Moments before she was ready to release the light, an explosion came from the audience.

The noise drowned out all the other sounds in his ears, replacing them with unidentifiable muffles. Ringing pulsated through his ears, so he couldn't hear properly. Even though he couldn't hear, he could feel the warm wet blood start to slide from his ears down the side of his face. Ace looked down to see blood dripping from Tommy's ears as well, the sight making Ace's stomach twist in uneasy knots.

His hands loosened around Tommy's wrists, letting the other boy free of the shackle-like grip Ace had. Ace was about to look over through a gap between a wall and the curtain separating the backstage from the main stage, but Tommy stopped him, grabbing Ace's face between his hands and shaking his head, gesturing for him not to do that.

Ace felt the ringing begin to fade and eventually disappear, making way for the sound of sirens and horrifying screams. Ace was selfishly thankful that no one he knew by name was injured. He felt his blood drip onto Tommy's hands, which still held his face. Ace brought a hand up to Tommy's, putting it on top of the back of his hand.

"Tommy! Get your lazy bum off the ground! We're going, here and now!" The shout from Gunnar made Tommy flinch, likely out of fear, and it only

made Ace hate Gunnar more on top of the terrorism he had just committed. Tommy's fearful eyes dashed between Ace and Gunnar.

"I'm sorry," Tommy whispered to Ace before pushing him off and going over to Gunnar, wiping the congealing red blood from the sides of his face with the palm of his hand. The remaining members of Liberation all gathered, and, in the midst of the chaos they created, they left.

Chapter 28: Liberation IV

Ace wiped the blood from his ears. Without Tommy to stop his gaze, Ace looked toward the sound of the explosion, the crowd and mainstage. The sight made the back of his throat burn with sickening bile. The colorful blinking lights and the red and blue spiraling glow from the many ambulances filtered his vision, the tragedy not having its full effect on his consciousness.

The amphitheater that had once been overcrowded and full of people now was mostly deserted, littered with the unconscious bodies of those who were caught in the blast. One of the few people who hadn't fled the area was a girl no older than thirteen.

The girl's face was painted red with wet blood, her hands shaking the body of a man who Ace assumed was her father, tears flooding down her face and dripping onto the still face of the man. She appeared to be saying something, but the discord of sound drowned out the girl's words before they reached Ace's ears.

The sight was sickening, and Ace couldn't look away, like his eyes were chained to the tragedy. Only when William shouted was he able to tear his eyes from the crying girl. "Ace! We need to get moving! Liberation is getting away!" Even then, his eyes only glanced away for a second until a light

brighter than the ambulances and neon party lights of the concert shone in the direction of the girl.

Ace saw a beam of light descend from the sky, slowing as it approached the girl. As the beam touched the girl's weeping form, a Shaman Mark took shape on the girl's forehead, looking like an ordinary birthmark.

William shouted again, breaking Ace out of his trance-like state as he watched the girl gaining her Blessing. "Ace! We're leaving you behind! Let's go! *Now*!" Ace finally redirected his eyes to William, who was beckoning him over with one hand before rapidly dashing away, following the other Shamans who had been brought to the mission.

All of them were easily a football field away. It would be impossible for Ace to catch up with them in such a short time. He needed to come up with an idea, and fast. Ace clenched his fists as he thought, subconsciously generating flame in his closed palms.

Ace got up and ran as he thought, racking his brain for anything that could possibly propel him forward. He unclenched one of his hands, releasing the flame in a small explosive burst that made him stumble. Unclenching his other hand had the same effect; it sent him forward and made him stumble.

It took a few seconds, but a lightbulb of an idea went off in his head. He ran as fast he could, now with renewed determination and vigor. He held his fists tightly, generating as much fire as he could. Then, once he was ready, he jumped into the air and released his fists behind him, expelling the fire outwards and propelling him forward at a high speed.

It felt like he was flying as he soared through the air. Buildings whizzed by in a blink, replaced by blurs of color of varying size and shape. With a couple more repetitions of sending bursts of explosive flame behind him, Ace had caught up with the other Shamans.

Most of his fellow Shamans traveled on anything but their feet. Yujiro and William took to the skies with a metal surfboard and a copied Blessing giving wings to them respectively. RT-781, despite being corroded and green from the rapid aging, had transformed its legs into wheels to transport Anatoly and Heidi on its back. Theodora also traveled through the air, keeping herself up with a ball of light, somehow propelling her forward.

In order to keep up, Ace had to blast explosions of flame behind him, which exhausted him, and yet he pushed himself further. Ace then saw what they were all chasing, an open-roofed black car that had a mounted machine gun. Ace could clearly see Gunnar sitting in the seat of the machine gun, and it didn't take long for him to open fire at the Shamans, especially aiming for Theodora.

Now that they were getting further from the concert location, more civilians were in the way. Ace didn't have time to wonder what they were thinking as he focused on dodging the bullets and avoiding hitting cars with himself or his bursts of fire. The open-roofed car, driven by one of the Liberators, was speeding recklessly past cars as the traffic thickened, making horns honk and tires screech.

The driver made a sharp turn down a mostly empty road, compensating rapidly as the car weaved from side to side from the quick change of direction.

Gunnar kept his eyes trained on the Shamans, holding down the trigger and firing an endless stream of bullets.

“How does he still have ammo?! He should’ve run out minutes ago!” William shouted as he stopped a handful of bullets and morphed them into a ball before adding them to his surfboard. A bullet whizzed by Ace and William as he spoke, nearly grazing Ace’s ear and William’s arm.

“My bet’s on the fact it’s his blessing, and if I can get some of his blood in my system, I’ll know what it is,” Yujiro said as the extended dove wings sprouting from his back flapped to keep him in the air.

“Then why doesn’t William just snatch some of it with his Metal Control?” Heidi asked with her thick German accent from her spot mounted on RT-781.

“It’s exhausting, Heidi, I may be superhuman, but I have limits!” William shouted as he dodged another barrage of bullets from Gunnar’s bottomless machine gun. The bullets hit buildings or slowed before landing on the ground, dinging against the concrete road.

RT-781 whizzed and beeped before shooting a chain at Gunnar, snagging his exposed flesh, which made Gunnar wince with pain, and taking blood on the sharp copper tip. RT sent the bloodied tip up to Yujiro, who licked the blood off, taking in the Blessing.

“It’s Armament Manipulation. He never runs out of ammo and he’s proficient in any weapon he gets his hands on,” Yujiro explained, flapping his wings and letting go of the copper point, letting it retract back into RT-781’s corroded exoskeleton.

Theodora wordlessly directed a beam of light towards the wheels of the Liberators' open-roofed car. As the light incinerated the wheels, the car continued forward for a few seconds, making sparks fly while it skidded to a stop.

All the Shamans stopped, either dropping to the ground from the sky or, in Anatoly and Heidi's case, dismounting RT-781. They all stood in front of the broken car as the Liberators climbed out, the fear even more visible now on Tommy's timid face.

Ace stepped forward, ready to fight the Liberators, only for William to put his hand on Ace's chest, stopping him. "Don't. Theodora's gonna take them on, and stepping in would only get in her way. Let the master go to work."

With that ominous message in mind, Ace stepped back, as Theodora took her own step forward, rolled her shoulders, and prepared to fight the Liberators. Mercy was something they would not experience tonight.

Chapter 29: Liberated I

Theodora rolled her shoulders, cracking her knuckles and stretching her arms. She stopped a few paces in front of the rest of the Shamans, taking a deep breath before opening her shut eyes and shifting her body between her light form and human form.

Her gray-streaked blonde hair shifted into a bright and shining golden color, the strands of her hair waving through the air like water, as were her clothes. Her platinum irises glowed, matching the golden color of her hair. Theodora made the area around her shine brighter in a menacing yet entrancing way. The Liberators stood on guard, a bead of sweat dripping down Hecate's forehead from the heat Theodora's half-light form produced.

Then began the onslaught.

Hecate–who had been healed from Tommy aging her back before she was injured–tried to turn invisible, but a dashing Theodora caught her by the neck before she could disguise herself, making the woman choke and claw at Theodora's hand as she silently begged for air.

The others all made space with Theodora, except for Tommy, who was frozen in shock and fear. Cassidy fired two bullets in rapid succession at Theodora, who caught them in a ball of light created in her other hand.

Theodora took the ball of light, aiming right at Hecate's face, the light making sweat pour from her brow, even as the woman clawed at her hand for air.

Hecate and her friend, Madison, sat in the shade of the brick wall they sat against. Madison was far from the bravest girl in the school; in fact, she may have been the most timid and apprehensive person Hecate knew. The two had bonded over a common enemy, their bully, Wynonna. Hecate promised Madison she would protect her the next time the two encountered Wynonna.

That day, it was especially hot, and that meant the two girls were that much more appreciative of the shade the wall granted them. In fact, it was one of the only spots where there was shade, making the other sweaty students envious of them. Hecate and Madison sat peacefully and silently together, appreciative of the comparatively colder temperature.

Until Wynonna showed herself to them.

"Move over. This is my spot now," she commanded, her voice authoritative and leaving no room for question of her desires. She crossed her arms as she glared down at the two girls, her eyes expressing a mix of disdain and loathing.

"W-We aren't going to m-move for you, W-Wynonna," Madison stuttered, her voice timid and shaky as she looked up from the asphalt to meet Wynonna's gaze. Hecate almost spoke up to add to Madison's words, but her tongue was tied in knots by her own mind.

Wynonna's eyebrows furrowed in irritation, and as Hecate blinked she saw a beast behind Wynonna's form. The transparent thing had a red tint, needle-sharp features, and a wicked toothy grin. Its pointed fingers rested on

top of Wynonna's head, as if possessing the girl.. The beast rested its shallow and manic eyes on Hecate, like a predator ready to toy with its new prey.

In a blink, the beast was gone, and Hecate realized an argument had escalated between Wynonna and Madison, the former shouting and yelling pointless words and shallow insults that cut deeply. Then, Wynonna punched Madison, her fist bloodying the other girl's nose.

Hecate couldn't do anything. She was frozen from a whirlwind of emotions as Wynonna rained down punches on the poor Madison. Through the bloody mess, Madison looked up at Hecate with betrayal. Hecate broke the one promise she made to the timid girl, the one promise that let her open up like a blossoming flower.

Now Hecate stepped on that blossomed flower, crushing and crumpling the delicately created life in it. A Shaman mark formed on the back of Hecate's head.

Hecate's lifeless body fell to the ground as Theodora let go of her neck, her face unrecognizable from the light that had evaporated most of it. The Shamans and remaining Liberators stared in a mixture of shock and fear. Cassidy managed to fire the rest of the bullets in the cylinder of his Peacemaker before his hand was evaporated by a beam of light created by Theodora, leaving a stump at the end of his arm.

Cassidy doubled over and screamed in pain, clutching the part of his wrist where his hand once connected to it. He barely had time to look up before he saw the beam of light barrelling towards his face.

Cassidy sat behind the wheel of his car, chuckling as he watched his two daughters bicker playfully in the backseat through the rearview mirror. The twins looked like carbon copies of their absent mother, and every time he looked at them, he was reminded of her. He reached up to rub his chin, feeling the stubble of his beard as he did. Cassidy continued driving, entering an intersection with a green light.

He didn't even see the other car coming as it ran the red light.

The car collided with the right of his, crashing in a terrible accident. Only minutes later did Cassidy awake to his own pain and the sound of police sirens as they came in the background. His vision was blurry and showing doubles, but he could clearly feel the excruciating pain in his legs. Only, he couldn't feel his toes, or his feet, or his lower legs at all.

Despite the pain and missing feeling, he ignored his injuries, only focusing on how his daughters were. The doubles he saw merged and his vision cleared, showing his lifeless twin daughters. A Shaman mark formed on his hip, granting him his Blessing.

The dead Cassidy fell forward, his face half evaporated from the beam of light. Now, the only Liberators left were Tommy and Gunnar, with Gunnar taking on Theodora. While she was fighting–and killing–the other Liberators, Gunnar had opened the trunk of the car from which he had been firing the machine gun and equipped himself with an assault rifle and military-grade armor.

Gunnar clicked back the bolt, loading his rifle as he stood ten or so paces away from Theodora, the two standing off with an anticipating silence.



Gunnar held the gun in both hands, the sight pointed directly at Theodora's chest, her clothes and hair still flowing through the air like it was water. Theodora had golden balls of light levitating in her palms, ready to fire when necessary.

Both shifted in their spot. A drop of sweat traveled from Gunnar's brow to his chin and fell to the ground. The second the quiet drop collided with the concrete road, it was like the green light starting a race, both parties sending their attacks to the other.

Gunnar held down the trigger, bullets soaring and cutting through the air to hit Theodora, who caught a majority of them with her light acting as a shield, though some sunk into her flesh, slicing her clothes and piercing her skin. Theodora winced, holding back the visceral instinct to react more sharply. Instead, she fired six smaller beams of light using the two balls she cast.

Most of the beams missed Gunnar, but one hit his shoulder, cutting clean through it and burning a hole in the bone. Gunnar couldn't hold his stoic expression and stance as he was hit. His gun dropped to the ground as he

clutched the bloodless wound, the light having cauterized his flesh as it passed through it.

Using the advantage she created, Theodora created a larger beam of light, fully incinerating Gunnar's arm as it passed through. The beam soared through the air behind him, coming back like a boomerang, yet giving enough time for Gunnar to look right in Theodora's eyes as his head was pierced by the inferno of light from behind.

Now the only Liberator remaining was the timid and scared Tommy. He was shaking and trembling despite the warm weather, and his eyes were wide as if he was face to face with the grim reaper. Theodora stood five paces away from him, a ball of light growing in her open palm as she faced it to Tommy.

Ace's heart pounded like a drum aching to break through his chest, beating loud enough for the whole world to hear the erratic rhythm. Moments before Theodora was about to fire, Ace jumped between them, arms extended.

"Stop!"

Chapter 30: Liberated II

Tommy was walking his way home, holding onto the straps of his backpack with his eyes trained on the concrete sidewalk in front of him. Tommy kicked a pebble in front of him, sending the irregularly shaped rock stumbling unpredictably.

After a couple more paces, Tommy looked up to see his house at the furthest point in the court down the block. Today was Wednesday, which meant his mom was making her best dish, and Tommy's favorite–carnitas.

As he approached the last block before the court, he glanced to the side, seeing Ace looking up to the sky at something. Curious, Tommy looked up as well, seeing nothing. He was about to look away when he saw something.

It was a certain patch of the sky, nothing was there, but it looked… fake, like something was being hidden. It looked like the sky had folded over that part, a mixture of blurring and TV static. An urge told him to look away. The urge was overwhelming, screaming at his senses to ignore the patch, to move on, to forget.

So he did just that, tearing his eyes away from the oddity and continuing the walk to his house. However, he didn't get much farther before his house suddenly collapsed. The roof caved in and the walls were crushed by some unseen force that was unexpected and powerful.

He ran as fast as he could to what remained of his house, hoping that his parents were okay as he sprinted. He came to the edge of the house, frantically sifting through the debris and rubble of his house to look for his parents.

Lifting a destroyed plank of wood, he saw a hand buried under the rubble. The limp hand belonged to his father, and as he grabbed the wrist of the arm, he felt it pulseless. A Shaman mark formed on Tommy's upper arm, his Blessing being given to him in that moment.

Ace's eyes were shut tight, his hands trembling as he held them out in front of him. Slowly, after he realized he wasn't dead, he opened his eyes. He saw Theodora, her palm now resting at her side, the ball of light having disappeared. In fact, the rest of her had returned to normal, her hair and clothes had stopped flowing through the air, the gray color of her hair and eyes replacing the gold.

"What is the meaning of this, Ace?" she asked him, her voice characteristically stoic.

"Don't kill him, Theodora. He-he didn't know better, he's not evil, I promise, just please don't kill him. *Please*," Ace begged, his hands still shaking as they remained extended in front of him, frozen in fearful anticipation.

Theodora took in a breath, looking from Ace's pleading expression to Tommy's fearful one. She contemplated before speaking, her voice twinged with reluctance. "I suppose he can live, but if he proves to us that he is, in fact, evil, I won't hesitate to dispose of him as I did the other Liberators."

Ace breathed a sigh of relief, his body relaxing the muscles he didn't realize he tensed. Slowly, he turned to Tommy, pushing his hair out of his face before speaking. "Tommy," he started, taking in a breath. "Do you want to join us? I'll make sure you're safe, I can promise you that, if nothing else." Ace extended his hand down to Tommy, offering aid.

Tommy's brown eyes flickered between Ace's offered hand and his face, the flakes of color among the amber of Ace's eyes like loose gold leaf. Tommy, with a hint of hesitation behind his scared eyes, took Ace's hand, hoisting himself up with the other boy's support. As Tommy got to his feet, he hugged Ace, holding him in a tight embrace.

Ace hugged him back, feeling the vulnerability and leftover fear the boy still had. "Why?" Croaked Tommy's muffled voice from Ace's shoulder, tears prickling the corners of his eyes, "Why did you save me?"

Ace wasn't entirely sure how to answer Tommy's question, mostly because he wasn't sure himself. Something in his heart begged him to save Tommy, making his body move before his mind could object and hesitate.

After a short minute, Ace replied with the most honest answer he could muster from the loose strands of emotion tied together in his mind. "Because I couldn't stand to see you die, to let Theodora kill you." After his words, Tommy held him tighter, only releasing his grip minutes later, but still remaining close to Ace.

Theodora rounded up the rest of the Shamans with the help of RT-781, the weight of the loss of those poor civilians still fresh and heavy in each of their

minds. Once she was sure she had everyone with her, she began to lead everyone back to the Shaman Base.

As the walk back began, Tommy never left Ace's side, holding his hand with his fingers intertwined with Ace's. His hold was tight, but not painful, as thoughTommy was using Ace as an anchor, an anchor that kept him stable. Ace was zoned out as he walked with Tommy, still dwelling on the people whose lives were lost.

Yujiro and William, meanwhile, walked a little in front of the two, Yujiro glancing back and smiling at the pair's subtle affection. He said something to William before slowing down to talk with Ace and Tommy.

"It's a miracle he's alive," Yujiro said, snapping Ace out of his thoughts and roping him back into reality. "Theodora doesn't have much regard for life, both Spirit and human, ever since she lost her husband and got her Second Awakening."

"Anatoly told me about that, the Second Awakening thing," Ace replied, giving a light squeeze to Tommy's hand, and receiving one in return from the boy.

"Well, no harm in going more in depth about it, especially since Theodora just showed how powerful she is," Yujiro said, then taking a deep breath before beginning to expand Ace's knowledge on Second Awakenings. "There are only five Blessings that can come out of Second Awakenings that we know about. There's Celestialism, which Theodora has, there's Cosmic Control, which I told you about a *while back*, then there's the three others I haven't told you about. Those are Luck Manipulation, Creation, and Reality. Luck Manipulation lets

the user change the probability of something happening in a range from one in two to one in a million. Creation lets the user make anything out of thin air. And finally, Reality lets the user change reality by speaking it into existence,"

"Wow, those sound… *powerful*," Ace said, his voice in mild awe.

"They come at a cost. Those Blessings either have crazy physical or mental tolls–in Theodora's case, a mental toll. A while back, near the founding of the Shaman Society, one person got Reality, which had an insane physical toll on them, nearly killing them in fact," Yujiro said, his words making Ace grateful for his Blessing, and by extension, what he had.

Chapter 31: Put to work

Weeks had passed since the incident with Liberation. The news and other media had blamed it on a terrorist attack by a foreign country. Ace lay in his bed with Tommy next to him, both boys covered by warm blankets.

Birds and cicadas chirped quietly from trees outside, the sun shone warm light from the cloudless blue sky, and the bed felt softer than a fluffy cloud. It was the epitome of a perfect zen morning. But that was on the outside; on the inside, however, things were much different.

On the inside, Ace was being tortured by nightmares poisoning his thoughts like a plague. Horrible and terrible things replayed over and over in Ace's mind: The Flesh Manipulation Rogue, the bone-chilling screams of the Shamans over the radio, the skeletons spelling Liberation strung by vines, the sound of the bomb, the begging child, and most of all, the dead Liberators.

Just as the near death of Tommy played in his mind, he woke up, his eyes shooting open. A few drops of sweat had formed on his brow as he slept. On instinct, he tried to bring his arm up to wipe the sweat away, only to find himself unable to, his arm held back.

Looking down, he saw Tommy holding his arm like a teddy bear. Looking further, he saw his right arm lazily around Tommy's waist, gently holding him. Tommy's face was relaxed, his black hair sprawled all over Ace's chest, where

he rested his head. Tommy now seemed much different from the timid and scared boy Ace had seen at the concert. This was the real Tommy, he felt.

Ace let his lips take the shape of a smile, and he moved his hand from Tommy's face to his face, brushing a hair away and tucking it behind his ear. The boy nuzzled against his chest like a purring cat, still asleep, and Ace's heart sped up just a bit. He couldn't deny how he had caught feelings for him, the evidence was too clear to ignore. The way his skin tingled under Tommy's touch, the way his face warmed up when he smiled, the way his heart beat faster whenever Tommy was near.

Ace reached his hand out, his fingers hesitantly extending towards the messy black locks of hair on Tommy's head. Suddenly, a *rap rap rap* on the door startled Ace and made his hand jolt back. The voice of Anatoly rang out from the other side of the door.

"Wake up, we have important things to do today, Ace," Anatoly said. His Russian accent was thick as he spoke, and, combined with Ace's grogginess, made it hard to fully understand what he said. Ace groaned as he processed Anatoly's words. He really didn't want to get up, not while Tommy was lying so peacefully on his chest.

Despite that, Ace poked the soft skin of Tommy's cheek, whispering to him. "Wake up, sleepyhead," Ace said, poking a couple more times before Tommy's hand batted his finger away in his sleep. Ace rolled his eyes, yet found the action endearing. Ace then flicked Tommy's forehead, making the other boy slowly wake up.

His eyes fluttered open like a carefree butterfly in flight, without a worry in the world. His head rose from Ace's chest, as the sun hit his coffee brown eyes. Then, not wanting to get up, he buried his face back down in Ace's chest, resenting the need to get up as much as Ace was.

"Tommy, you better get up, I have things to do today," Ace said, poking the top of his head once more.

Tommy let a drowsy whine leave his mouth as he batted away Ace's hand again. "I don't wanna," he said sleepily, still clinging onto Ace and treating him as his pillow.

Eventually, after continual pestering by Ace, Tommy finally let him get up and get dressed. Tommy got up as well, changing when Ace left the room. Ace was face to face with Anatoly as he left, the man smelling faintly of alcohol and his hair a shade or so whiter. Anatoly smiled down at Ace before speaking, something he hadn't done ever since Dmitri's death.

"You and Tommy sure are comfortable," he said, teasing the other boy in his Russian accent. Ace felt his cheeks heat up at the tease, and he was about to say something in return when Tommy left Ace's room, dressed in some of Ace's clothes. "Speak of the Devil," Anatoly said, looking the sleepy boy up and down as he yawned.

Tommy put his chin on Ace's shoulder, still determined to keep him as a pillow, which only made the embarrassed blush spread on his face. Ace cleared his throat before speaking, unable to meet Anatoly's or Tommy's eyes. "So, what is it you needed me to do?"

“Ah, that’s right, Theodora is having you do paperwork, now that the Liberation incident has passed *and* because you’re a Level B,” Anatoly said, gesturing for Ace to follow him as he went downstairs and outside the dormitory building. Ace began to follow him, leaving Tommy to his devices. Ace followed the older Anatoly to Theodora’s office, entering to see her with a second woman.

The woman had striking and vibrant white hair that rested past her shoulders, belying her smooth and youthful face. Her ageless face was hidden by a nickel gray scarf that showed only her eyes, which were yellow like a snake’s sclera. The rest of her clothes were as black as charcoal, lined and accented with a glittering silver. Overall, the woman had a very mysterious and ominous aura, even emanating power and importance.

Theodora spoke as Anatoly and Ace entered her office. “Ah, Ace, this–” she gestured to the woman standing next to her. “–Is Celeste Moreau, A Level X Shaman here. Her blessing is called Rerouting, which lets her reroute the entrance or exit of any door to another door.” Theodora explained, Celeste nodding at the explanation of her Blessing.

“Oh, so she makes the door to the Shaman Base possible!” Ace blurted out before he could stop himself. He covered his mouth out of embarrassment after he said it.

“Precisely,” Theodora responded, ignoring Ace’s embarrassment and continuing to speak. “She will be rerouting one of these trapdoors into your new office for paperwork. Right now you won’t have much, but later, it will

ramp up," she explained, then looked over to Celeste and gestured for her to go ahead.

She traced the edges of the trapdoor and a yellow and orange string-like thing came out of it, flowing through the air like a fishing line in water. She pulled the string out and stretched it, winding it into odd and fantastical shapes. Then, the string disappeared and the trapdoor glowed. "It is done," She said, her voice cold and accented with French.

Theodora opened the trapdoor, and when Ace looked down it, he didn't know what he expected to see, but it certainly wasn't a sparsely furnished detective-style office. He had a bird's eye view of it. In the middle of the room was a desk stacked with papers and a pen on top and a rolling chair behind it. The windowless room was illuminated by a warm yellow light.

"Down," Anatoly said in a firm voice, and Ace nodded, descending into the office and taking his seat. "Don't come back up until you're done with the paperwork," he said before shutting the trapdoor, leaving Ace to his lonesome.

Ace looked around the room for a moment. Then shaking his head and looking down, he picked up the provided pen and put the ink tip to the paper.

Chapter 32: Shamanism Contest

It had been the most excruciatingly boring hours of Ace's life before he finally gave in and left the room, climbing out the trapdoor and leaving Theodora's office. He was bored, more bored than his English teacher's monotonous lectures made him and more bored than during his recovery time after the Fear Spirit of Stalkers cut him. He needed a distraction, something to take away the boredom that plagued his brain.

Ace wandered the grounds, searching for someone or something. He found himself lost in thought, kicking up dirt and dust as he strolled on through. Eventually, though, something caught his eye. It was a piece of paper nailed to one of the support beams holding up the Dormitory Building.

Curious, Ace walked to it. On closer inspection, it wasn't a random paper, it was a poster–an advertisement–for something called 'The Shamanism Contest'.

Ace held the edge of the poster in his hand, getting a clearer look at the advertisement. The words under the title described how the Shamanism Contest was a competition for Shamans of all Levels to test their strength, prove their worth, and gain fame and glory among the country-wide Shaman Society.

At the bottom of the paper was a date for the competition, only two months from now. He brought his eyes up from the paper, looking around at the mostly

empty Shaman Grounds. Being as bored as he was, having something–anything–to look forward to was like a gallon of water to a thirsty man.

Ace let the paper fall from his hand, a breeze making it float in the wind before settling into the position it was before he had interfered. Determined to learn more about the contest, Ace began searching for any of the Professors, assuming they would know about it.

He scanned the area, not recognizing any of the faces he gazed upon. After a minute or so of looking and re-looking, he was about to give up, until William's familiar face entered his peripheral vision. "William! Come here for a sec!" Ace exclaimed, cupping the side of his mouth in an attempt to amplify the sound.

William, who remained oblivious to Ace's voice, had earbuds slotted into his fair-skinned ears, his messy brown hair covering them partially. Small, almost imperceptible, pimples littered his jaw and neck, like dots of a pointillism painting. William's eyes were brown as tree bark, a gateway to his big heart.

His clothes reflected his laid back personality, favoring a casual pair of jeans and sweater over the semi-professional clothes worn by the other higher-ups of the Shaman Grounds. Yujiro often wore similar clothes, one of them possibly having inspired the other.

Ace kissed his teeth at William's unintentional cold shoulder, calling out once more to him. "William! I'm talking to you!" This time, Ace cupped his mouth with both hands, the sound finally breaking through to William, who

removed one of his earbuds, his resting face twisting into a smile as he saw Ace.

Ace beckoned William, to which the other boy responded, striding over and asking, “What’s up?” His eyes moved between Ace and the poster.

“What’s the Shamanism Contest?” Ace asked once William was close enough.

“Well, it’s a tournament between Shamans across all of the Shaman Bases in America, all for entertainment and fun of course. People very rarely die when participating, but that’s usually the Level C’s and under.”

“That’s…” Ace paused, picking and choosing the next word to leave his mouth. “Reassuring,” he said, William huffing out a quick and quiet laugh, taking the remark as sarcasm, which it only half was.

“One guy got defenestrated one time,” William added, his mouth twitching and moving as if he was trying to hold back a smile.

“Doesn’t that mean to throw someone out a window?” Ace asked, then, in disbelief he added, “Did that seriously happen?”

“Nah, I just needed to use my word of the day,” William responded. Ace rolled his eyes and gave an irritated punch to his shoulder, making William grin. He brought the conversation back on track by asking him how the contest worked.

“Two Shamans of the same Level are pitted against each other. Competitors are eliminated after two losses, so losing your first round doesn’t get you thrown out immediately. Usually a Level X wins, which is to be expected, but it's always enjoyable nonetheless,” William said matter-of-factly. “The last time

a Shaman that wasn't a Level X won the contest was way before I was in the Shaman Society, actually."

"Sounds like fun."

"It is, do you wanna sign up? It's a great motivator to get stronger,"

Ace thought about William's offer for a moment, his tongue moving around his mouth as he thought, a habit of his. "Yeah," he finally said. "I do." To which William nodded, gesturing for Ace to follow as he led him to Theodora's office. Ace trailed behind like a curious cat being led to food.

Inside Theodora's empty office was a sign-up sheet for people to join the Shamanism Contest. Already written down, in varying degrees of legible handwriting, were the majority of the Professors and a few others he knew like Marisella. However, Tommy's name was noticeably absent from any of the printed stacked rectangles on the page.

William handed Ace a pen from his jeans pocket, and Ace scribbled down his name in block letters that stuck out like a sore thumb compared to the cursive of the Professors and Marisella.

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Ace threw a fury of hits against the punching bag, the leather weight swinging as all his attacks landed. As the bag swung back, he winded up a

punch, his clenched hand burning to life with a mix of white and blue flames, the fire curling like an animal trapped between his fingers, writhing and begging to escape his clutches as it slithered up his arm.

He threw the punch into the bag, punching a hole right through it and spilling the ripped clothes that acted as filling onto the floor. He pulled his fist out; his armpits, back, and face drenched in sweat, his body trying to cool him down to no avail. Ace brought his hand up to his forehead, wiping the sweat off his face with a downward motion.

His lungs felt shallow as he took in breath after breath, slowly ridding himself of the exhaustion that the training had induced. Despite only having a few months of physical training since joining the Shaman Society, the impact it had on his body was clearly effective, his muscles had become stronger, abs taking shape on his stomach, and he just felt more powerful.

He glanced to the side, seeing Tommy's eyes lingering on his tight shirt, darting up to meet his gaze and looking away just as quick, light pink barely dusting his cheeks. Ace felt a surge of pride, his heart quickening, and he was about to say something, until William interrupted him.

"Ace! It's time for the contest! Let's go!" he shouted, entering the training room and beckoning Ace to follow. Ace's eyes were torn away from Tommy as William spoke, but he stole a glance at the other boy before leaving.

William led Ace through the Shaman Grounds, taking him through the door to the apartment complex and stepping out of the abandoned building, Ace close behind.

Parked on the road was a limousine, the luxurious car a striking pure white. Tinted windows hid the equally luxurious interior from passersby, also disguising the anonymous driver. One by one, all of the Shamans going to the Shamanism Contest entered the extravagant car.

The interior of the vehicle was grand and imposing. Pearly white cushioned seats felt like clouds under Ace, each one spotless and well-kept. Colored LED lights lined the edges of the ceiling, casting an atmospheric blue light over everyone throughout the car.

Sitting closest to the wall segregating the passengers and the driver were Celeste and Theodora, the two women sitting in complete silence. Yujiro and William sat side-by-side, Yujiro's eyes closed and his head on William's shoulder. Ace sat across from William, getting a front row seat to their affectionate display. Marisella sat next to him, one leg crossed and on top of the other.

The rest of the Professors and other Shamans partaking in the contest filed in afterwards, taking random seats in the limo with no rhyme or reason. As the door to the car slid shut, the vehicle pulled out for the Shamanism Contest. The drive didn't last long, because the other cars on the road, respecting the luxuriousness of the vehicle, let it pass with no fuss.

Upon arrival, everyone filed out of the car, stepping into the light of the bright sun and onto the hot pavement. Ace followed, the yellow sun shining brightly, illuminating the world in front of him. The towering and colossal building in front of him resembled the Roman Colosseum, perfectly preserved. The elliptical limestone architecture was staggeringly big, making the Shamans

crowding to get inside for the contest look miniscule. No two Shamans looked alike, each one of different ethnicities, heights, weights, clothing, or some unique mix of them all.

"Welcome! Welcome! Thank you all for coming to this wondrous event this fine evening!" A posh but frenzied voice echoed from the Colosseum, sounding just excited enough to be annoying.

Yujiro jabbed Ace gently with his elbow, the baggy hoodie he had on softening the already purposefully weak blow. "Fun fact, our Shaman Base, despite being one of thousands in the country, has *the* most Level X Shamans," Yujiro said to Ace as they all walked.

Soon, all of the Shamans had been brought into the Colosseum, some taking to the stands of onlookers. Others sat in a lobby area, full of comfortable seating and fluorescent lighting. All the Shamans talked and conversed while they waited for the first person to be brought into the arena.

"For the first battle of the day, we have two Level B Newcomers!" The booming voice echoed, sounding frenzied and excited for the action of the day, making Ace perk up. "We have Julaine Lee versus–," the announcer paused for dramatic effect.

He finished with an equally grand voice "Ace Hawkins!"

Chapter 33: Brawls and Battles I

The sea of people filling the stands of the Colosseum cheered and chanted out the names of Ace and his opponent. Despite the deafeningly loud noise, it was silent to Ace, who was lost in thought, rather than present in the moment of ecstasy. As his fellow Shamans wished him luck, Ace entered the arena.

The sun blazed brightly in the arena, and the intense heat made the situation feel more barbaric than organized. The arena floor was massive, and obstacles of varying sizes and shapes littered the huge sand-covered floor. Off the other side of the arena was a woman not quite dressed for the weather.

She wore blue denim jeans, the cuffs of which were folded and compressed over her sneakers, and a jet-black hoodie. The woman had her hands shoved into the pockets of the hoodie, her eyes hidden by the garment's hood. The announcing voice echoing throughout the arena was drowned out by the roaring cheers of those in the stands.

Ace's eyes darted around, taking in his surroundings. Sweat trickled down his face. His heart pounded. He picked at his nails. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and tapped his foot on the ground. His eyes then focused on the woman. She had brought her hands out of the jacket, showing how they had been repeatedly bandaged with gauze. However, her hands appeared to move freely despite the tight wrap.

“So, uh… what’s your Blessing?” Ace asked. The silence between the two contestants was too awkward for Ace’s liking, and only one question was on his mind. The woman rolled her eyes in response, unraveling and retightening the gauze surrounding her hand.

“I don’t give away information that could be used against me, and that includes telling you what my Blessing is,” she said, her voice raspy, like she had been smoking cigarettes not long before entering the arena. She rolled up her sleeves, revealing more bandages on her forearms. Unlike the gauze on her hands, however, the bandages surrounding her forearms had been tinged red from blood. Ace felt a bad taste in the back of his throat. He had seen blood before, but seeing bloody bandages always made Ace feel sick.

Before he could do or say anything else, the announcer spoke. “Ladies and gentlemen, before we start our first match of the day, I want to thank you all for coming. Now, let’s get this show on the road. Fighters, begin!” With that signal, the woman wasted no time charging at Ace, fists clenched and strides long and full of intent. Her punch was quick and powerful.

But Ace was faster.

He weaved past the punch, moving to the side and throwing his own punch at her arm. His punch collided, staggering the woman. He conjured up flames in his hand, stepping back and releasing them at her. A pillar of crackling and sizzling blue flames launched itself directly at her. After a solid few seconds of holding the beam of flames, he pulled his arms away, taking a breath from the exertion.

As the crackling and heat from the flames died out, so did the dancing fire. However, instead of the opposing Shaman being covered in burns and scars, she looked exactly the same. Untouched and unaffected. In front of her was an entirely black circle floating and unwavering. The circle shrank and closed, leaving no remains of Ace's blast of fire.

"How did you–" Ace began to ask, though he never got the chance to finish his thought as an exact copy of the abyssal black circle opened, though this one launched a blast of fire at Ace, the one he had just shot at her. The flames weaved through the air, accelerating towards Ace at a great speed. He barely managed to dodge it, his clothes singed and burned from the close call.

"I'll humor you and tell you my Blessing," the woman began, tightening the gauze-wrap on her arms. "I have a pocket dimension at my command. Anything that goes in is saved for later use, thus allowing me to reflect the attacks of any idiots that try to fight me with no prior knowledge of my Blessing, usually resulting in their immediate defeat."

Ace gritted his teeth, making the woman smirk. She got into a defensive stance, waiting for Ace to attack her. Ace only waited a beat before dashing in, fists at the ready. He threw powerful punches at the woman, but she dodged or blocked each attack. Ace readied a left hook and launched it at the side of her head. Just before it could connect, a black circle opened up and took his hand.

In an instant, he had punched himself with his left hook, the woman's smug demeanor only growing as he rubbed his bruised jaw. Despite the injury, he continued launching and dodging his own punches. He feigned a punch, baiting out a portal. Once the portal opened, he saw his opening, sweeping his leg

under her feet and making her land on her back on the tough hot ground of the arena.

He brought his hand back, clenched in a fist, and engulfed it in an inferno of fire. The cheers of the people in the stands overwhelmed the quiet sound of the crackling fire sprouting from his wrist. He launched the flames right at her, the flames spreading onto her clothes and skin in a relentless onslaught of heat. An ending bell rang through the arena thrice. *DING DING DING*. It rang, making the crowd cheer louder.

Ace stepped away from the woman and basked in the applause, closing his eyes and spreading his arms. Soon, though, the applause died out, replaced by audible gasps of terror and fear. Ace slowly opened his eyes. The gazes of everyone in the stands were behind him. He turned, his eyes falling onto the woman. All of the fire was extinguished, and she looked perfectly fine. She looked exactly the same.

Until she opened her eyes.

The white of her eyes was replaced by a cotton candy pink, the iris and pupil completely absent. Instead, her eyes had a moving hypnotic swirl pattern of a banana yellow and light blue. It was like she was being mind-controlled. Her mouth opened, and a voice that wasn't her own echoed from beyond her teeth. The voice deep and broken.

"I am the Spirit of Control," the voice said from the woman's mouth. The Spirit moved her limbs like a puppet master, bending and weaving them in an unnatural and almost sickening manner. The Spirit puppeteered her body into an awkward pose that resembled the one she had done when she prepared for

Ace to attack her. “This is your warning, Shamans, *it* is back. And now that *it's* back, the Rebirth will come.”

Panicked and distressed whispers spread among the people in the stands. While everyone was distracted, whispering among themselves, the possessed woman attacked, her arm bending in a way that would leave a bone broken to punch Ace right in the liver.

The fist connected with his gut, nearly making him throw up. He staggered back, doing his best to recover quickly. He set his stomach on fire, the flames spreading onto the possessed Shaman and burning their skin and gauze. As a screech echoed from the woman’s mouth with the Spirit’s voice, she staggered back, patting herself to put out the flames.

Ace took the opportune moment to make use of one of the combos he practiced before coming to the Shamanism Contest, the mix of punches and kicks knocking the woman to the ground. As she fell, something crawled up her throat; she clawed at it, choking as it exited her mouth.

A slimy animalistic Spirit climbed out of the woman’s mouth, its ectoplasmic slime pouring over her mouth and sliding down her chin, tears in her eyes as it left her. The Spirit soon fled, leaving its ominous warning to fill the heavy air with caution and distress.

The Rebirth will come.

Chapter 34: Brawls and Battles II

Ace had rested up in the time after his brawl. Mostly everyone had moved on and bet on the newly competing Shamans, rooting for them and roaring out cheers, overall enjoying themselves. Ace, on the other hand, couldn't shake the gut feeling eating away at him. The feeling that something was wrong. The words– or rather, warning–of the Spirit rang through his mind and rattled his bones, repeating itself over and over.

It is here… The Rebirth will come… The chilling words bounced around his skull and shivered down his spine.

Ace looked around the room for a distraction, something to keep his mind off the eerie warning swimming around in his mind. Then, he heard the perfect distraction, a familiar name being called out in the loud voice of the announcer.

"In our next battle, we have Marisella Franco facing off against Augustus Cassius!" As the voice full of excitement boomed throughout the Colosseum and arena, the people erupted into cheers, encouraging the fighters about to fight in the arena.

Marisella rose from her seat, she wore jean shorts and a baggy white t-shirt that waved calmly in the light breeze flowing through the concrete building. She stepped into the arena with fearless confidence gleaming behind her hazel eyes. As she stepped into the arena, she took a hair tie from her pocket, holding

it between her teeth as she wrapped her black hair into a ponytail, locking it in place with the hair tie.

Marisella had her palms facing behind her, silently robbing the surrounding air of its moisture and making two spheres of water hover in her hand, the shape loose and flowing as it sloshed against the walls of an invisible prison. The other person in the arena was a burly man, his chest and arm hair, shown clearly thanks to his shirtless-ness, were as black as a moonless night sky.

The man looked confident, not even bothering to hide the smug scoff that passed his lips after he laid his eyes on Marisella. His grin, showing teeth yellowed from poor brushing, was unapologetically condescending. He brought his fists in front of him, cracking his knuckles and making audible pops.

"This is my opponent? A Level *X*?" he asked in mock disbelief, making Marisella's eyebrows furrow in irritation, her left eye twitching in an attempt not to let the words provoke her. The announcer, either not hearing or purposefully ignoring his comment, went on anyway.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the first match between two Level X Shamans of the day. It sure will be intense! That being said, let the fight–" He paused, Marisella and the other man staring each other down with intensity, Marisella more so. "–Begin!"

Marisella immediately combined the two balls of water levitating in her palms, firing them at the man in a quick and powerful jet. The beam of water dashed quicker than Ace had ever seen it move, the liquid getting a direct hit on the man's ribs. Though, like magic, the instant the water hit his skin, it got

absorbed into it, creating sponge-like holes and taking it in like it was just a running faucet.

The man let out a hearty laugh at Marisella's eyes, which had widened to the size of saucers from shock. He flexed his muscles, the water spilling out of the spongy holes in his body. Then he rolled his neck, striding up at a remarkable pace and throwing a punch at Marisella.

She narrowly avoided the punch, grabbing his muscular arm with both hands and creating ice with her blessing, spreading it across his bicep. His skin momentarily became pink before melting the ice. His skin was hot enough to make Marisella's palms pink with heat. She gritted her teeth as she yanked back her burned hands. The man threw more punches, Marisella blocking them with water-made shields. Marisella shot ice at the ground, making the arena look like an ice skating rink. She glided across it with no problem, shooting bolts of sharp water at the man while circling around him, each drop of water either being absorbed by his skin or rolling off it like it was hydrophobic.

The man scoffed as another bolt struck him, the water sliding down his bare chest without so much as a bruise. His feet shaped and changed, a large metal blade popping out of the sole of his foot as it became an ice skate. With remarkable speed, he zipped over to Marisella, not giving her a moment to react as his fist connected with her stomach.

Marisella got launched backward into the wall of the colosseum, eliciting gasps of shock from the crowd. She muttered something under her breath, a resignation, an acceptance of loss, though reluctant. The announcer shouted to the audience that the round was over, her opponent basking in the praise and

cheers erupting from the onlookers as Marisella hobbled over to the exit of the arena.

She glared at Ace with her deep hazel eyes as their gazes met once she returned. “Don’t even think about it,” she said through gritted teeth, hopping over and sitting down on a bench, the cheers dulled through the concrete walls of the colosseum.



“Heidi Fischer–” the announcer began, his voice loud over the speaker as he talked from somewhere unseen. “–Versus… Orion Winters!” Heidi rose from her chair, rolling her head and cracking her joints before walking into the arena, her face stoic and unchanging. It was almost uncanny how little it changed, almost never portraying her emotions as anything but serious and disinterested. On the other side was a boy with skin paler than snow, and straight hair black as spilt ink. The boy, Orion, had baggy jeans, which were ripped open at the knees, and a T-shirt for what looked to be a rock band.

His eyes were brown like tree bark. Life had used his face as its canvas, pimples and scars its paint. His gaze was unwavering on Heidi, the corners of his eyes sharp as they focused solely on the woman. He brought his fists up into a readied stance, white fingerless gloves shielding his palms.

The boy narrowed his eyes, glaring at Heidi. His arms became cloaked in shadow, darker as if the sun was conveniently blocked to perfectly obscure his sleeves and skin. Heidi's fingertips crackled with electricity, sparking in little flashes of lightning, the bolts jumping between fingers and running along her nerves like conductors.

"Begin!" As the announcer shouted, with a crack of thunder, Heidi shot a bolt of lightning out of her fingertips towards the boy. It reached him in a blink, but was fortunately caught by a shield made out of pure dark shadow. The shield absorbed the electricity, then shifted into a javelin.

Orion threw the javelin, the spear flying across the arena and grazing Heidi's skin just enough to draw blood. She quickly grabbed her arm where the cut was, hiding any spilt blood under her fair-skinned fingers. The boy brought his open palms together, like he was pressing down on some invisible force that prevented him from closing his hands.

Wisps of shadow and darkness climbed and crawled across the floor of the arena, beckoned by the boy's pushing hands, and morphed together, mixing and molding into a monster–a *beast*. It had six eyes the size of wrecking balls, three on each half of its gargantuan face. Sharp pointed teeth as long as arms sprouted from its open maw, spikes trailing down its spine and rattling as it slammed its tail against the ground.

Heidi seemed unfazed by the monstrous form the shadows in front of her took on. Bolts of lightning formed in her fists as she stepped closer to fight the shadow monster. The shadows licked its teeth with a pointed tongue, eyes trained on Heidi like a predator watching a juicy prey animal.

The monster lunged forward at her with its jaw open, ready to swallow her whole. Heidi combined the lightning bolts into one, throwing it right into the mouth of the monster, electrocuting it as the lightning ran across every inch of its body.

Just as quickly as the monster took shape, it had lost it, melting into pools of liquid shadow before retreating into darkness, leaving no trace of the monster's existence. The boy was stunned, shocked and frozen as Heidi pushed her advantage.

She dashed right to the boy, pushing him to the ground and resting one boot on his chest, palm crackling as it pointed towards the boy's face. The round ended, Heidi claiming victory as quick as lightning.

Chapter 35: Brawls and Battles III

The announcer called for Celeste Moreau and RT-781, both contestants entering with little reaction. Celeste still wore her scarf and other dark colored garments, and RT had its oxidation reversed when Tommy joined the Shaman Society.

“This is an unfair fight, RT-781 will easily beat Celeste. I doubt it’ll even be a challenge for it,” Ace said absentmindedly, just voicing his thoughts to the other Shamans around him. William came up behind him, poking the crown of Ace’s head and making an incorrect buzzer sound to the best of his ability.

“Don’t be so pessimistic. She isn’t one to be underestimated easily. Once she trapped someone in an endless loop of doorways until he starved to death. Poor guy got driven insane before he went out.” He said this as casually as talking about the weather, as though inhumane solutions were as common as they come. Then again, Shamanism wasn’t a job for the light of heart, and desperate times called for desperate measures, so he couldn’t judge one bit. Nevertheless, a shiver of intimidation ran down Ace’s spine at the implication.

The footfalls from Celeste’s boots and the grinding and clanking of RT’s gears were drowned out by the deafening cheers of excitement, the smell of popcorn and soda complementing the cheery mood.

Celeste stood, and readied herself for RT-781's near perfect reaction time, choosing a stance where she could easily switch between offense and defense depending on what RT's computing decided was the best course of action.

The robot stood some ten yards away from her, the sun shining down on the metallic plating that armored its core. The cheers and jeers from the audience silenced themselves in anticipation.

The dull sound of whirring and gears turning were the only sounds that seemed to exist in the silence, the rest of the world on mute. Celeste moved idly as she waited, her fingers twitching and orange eyes darting between RT-781 and the fans in the audience. Her scarf waved like a flag in the chilly breeze, blowing the smell of old clothes into her nostrils.

RT's gaze trained on Celeste, the flashlights posing as its eyes flickering on as it analyzed her. The panels on its lower legs parted, revealing its inner wiring, which glowed a neon, radioactive blue.

The piercing voice of the announcer broke the zen silence, RT reacting to the trigger in an instant and releasing the charge that built up in its legs to dash forward. RT-781 raised its fist, ready to land a merciless punch on Celeste's face.

Celeste was anticipating the attack, ducking under it by bending her back so her head was upside down. RT's fist soared over Celeste, leaving it open for counters. Celeste didn't waste a moment to grab onto RT, using a mix of wrestling moves and acrobatics to disorient and grapple it.

She brought the robot to the ground, her toned arms around RT-781's neck like a snake coiling its prey. As Celeste pulled on the robot's copper skull, RT

managed to break the grip by bending its limbs in ways impossible for a normal person.

Metal and wire alike twisted and bent as RT-781 weaved itself out of Celeste's headlock, the machine's inner workings whirring and grinding against each other as it moved. Now out of Celeste's iron grip, RT wound back its fist, the plating on its upper arm parting and letting out a vibrant blue glow. In an off-puttingly monotone and robotic voice, RT roared.

"LET US FINISH THIS BATTLE QUICKLY," it said, the punch shooting forward quicker than a bullet before Celeste could respond. The metallic fingers making up RT's hand connected with Celeste, hitting her in the ribs. The pale skinned woman winced, the sound muffled by the fabric of her scarf.

She staggered, but quickly bounced back, grabbing RT's wrist and yanking it close, delivering a roundhouse kick to its head. She built momentum, using the back of her knee to pull its head to hers, delivering one final blow to the metallic skull of RT-781 and essentially knocking it out.

The crowd cheered with excitement, Celeste taking a bow. Ace was silenced from shock, clapping along with the entertained crowd of Shamans.

"Told you so," William said to Ace, giving him a playful jab to the shoulder.

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Anatoly cracked his neck and knuckles as he entered the arena, his opponent already having entered on the other side of the sandy battleground. His opponent was a woman who didn't look a day over thirty, her long black hair dyed a raspberry red at the tips.

Her sharp features were accentuated under the bright sun, as she fixed her glare on Anatoly's eyes. He brought an arm up to block the sun from his vision, his hand only partially helping against the bright ball of fire.

The announcer broke the suspenseful silence and started the game. Anatoly acted faster than the woman, throwing a devastating punch right to her liver. Anatoly knew full well that a clean punch to someone's liver could end a fight right there and then. The opposing Shaman, however, reacted right on time.

Out of nothing came something. An iron pole jutted out of the ground in an instant. It was directly in the flight path of Anatoly's hand. His fist connected directly with the pole, sending a jolt of pain through his knuckles, which took the brunt of the force.

Anatoly yanked his aching hand away, wincing from the pulsing ache in his fingers. He quickly set aside his pain, focusing on the task at hand. Anatoly wound up a punch, throwing it quickly in an attempt to catch the Shaman before she could use her blessing to create a defense.

Another metal bar appeared, but too late to catch Anatoly, his punch hitting the woman's side and knocking her down. Anatoly pushed his advantage, using

the metal as grips to maneuver himself quicker to the prone Shaman. He got over her, bringing his fist up to strike down.

As he brought the punch down, he felt something tug on his fist, stopping him from bringing it down more than a few inches. Thick rope was wrapped around his wrist, anchored to the bars she had made previously. With Anatoly distracted by his incapacitation, the woman got up. She pushed herself off the ground and kicked him right in the jaw, sending him to the ground in an instant.

The woman planted her foot on Anatoly's chest, the heel of her boot digging into his stomach mercilessly. A wooden mallet formed in her hand, taking shape right before Anatoly's silver eyes. The woman didn't have to say anything for Anatoly to know what she was suggesting. She had the clear advantage in this situation, and he couldn't realistically overcome it.

He nodded, surrendering the fight. A true fighter went out on his own terms.

Chapter 36: Brawls and Battles IV

One of the most anticipated fights was about to commence. Shamans all across the country had been debating and theorizing about the results, comparing statistics and personal opinions alike all for the stars to align in this one moment of competition.

William entered the arena, sword drawn and lugged over his shoulder as he came to the center, mouth plastered in a wide competitive grin. The silver blade of his sword gleamed and glimmered under the bright sun. Cheers and screams all echoing his name originated from the stands.

An almost equal amount of support came from the audience as Yujiro did the same, sword in hand as he kicked up dust with his sneakers, letting it cling to the hems of his jeans without care. He held his katana to his side, letting the point of the blade scrape the ground, leaving a wavering line as he approached the center of the arena. He took off his hoodie. His arms bore many tattoos, similar to the etchings on his katana, each one faintly glowing in different colors under the late afternoon sun.

“You better not hold back. I want a *real* fight, William,” Yujiro said once he was within earshot of William.

“We’ll go ice skating in an active volcano the day I hold back against you,” William responded, smiling, making Yujiro huff. Both boys wielded their

weapons tightly, an air of friendly competition enveloping them as they awaited the announcer to start the fight.

The whole arena was silent in anticipation, so quiet a whisper would sound like a shout. Time seemed to pass in slow motion as everyone watched, waiting for the announcer to begin the fight. The announcer broke the silence with a loud shout to begin, everyone in the crowd cheering as the battle began.

William attacked first, swinging his sword and aiming right for Yujiro's abdomen, which was parried with ease by the other's katana. Yujiro lunged forward, the blade on a straight path to William's wide open shoulder.

The metal of the katana bent around his shoulder, avoiding it entirely. It only fixed itself when he pulled the katana away, the blade straightening back to normal.

"Cheater," Yujiro said, a hint of humor in his tone.

"Sore loser," William quipped back, pushing his advantage and slicing at Yujiro's ankles. Yujiro brought his foot up and stepped on the blade, keeping it on the ground. He brought his katana up, aiming it like an executioner ready to behead a criminal, slamming it down. At the same time, William's sword melted and reformed just in time to catch Yujiro's sword, the edge mere inches away from his sweating forehead.

The two were equally matched, perfect counters to one another. Both of them had an equal chance of conquering the other in combat. It really was anyone's game.

An etching on Yujiro's katana glowed a vibrant white as Yujiro sprouted wings from his back and soared into the air to avoid another swing from William, who grinned up at the flying boy.

"And you called *me* a cheater," William called out to Yujiro playfully. Yujiro quipped back with something, but the words went unheard by William, who was too far below to hear them. William melted his sword down into liquid, the metal clinging and shaping itself around his shoes to make boots of sorts. William manipulated the metal, elevating himself through the air and getting to the hovering boy in a matter of seconds.

The sounds of the audience overwhelmed their hearing as William reached Yujiro, whose temporary dove wings flapped to keep him suspended in flight. William readied his fists, and Yujiro sheathed his katana, doing the same.

William threw the first punch, the two of them blocking and counter attacking so quickly that it looked more like a blur of limbs intertwined than actual punching. Soon though, one of them pierced the other's defense, the fist landing right against the other's stomach. Yujiro, losing his concentration, fell to the ground, landing on his back. His lover descended much more gracefully.

William panted, still standing while Yujiro lay on the ground. "I win," he said between heavy breaths, sweat dripping from his brow and sliding down his cheek. William extended his hand down to Yujiro.

Yujiro looked up at him, not speaking as he took William's hand, helping himself off the ground. Yujiro thrusted their connected hands into the air, an eruption of cheers coming from the audience as he did.

“I love doing that,” Yujiro muttered to William, the two exiting the arena as the cheers from their battle still raged on.

Chapter 37: Man and Machine

After the battle between Yujiro and William, all the ones after blurred together. Ace was not really paying attention to them, nor was the audience. He yawned, the drowsiness imposed on him from his practice earlier that day making his eyelids feel heavier than normal. The announcer's booming voice, however, shook him awake, the voice making his eyelids suddenly weightless once more.

"For our next brawl, we'll be pitting Ace Hawkins against RT-781!" rang throughout the arena. Ace swallowed, nerves plaguing his brain. Though he had lost to Celeste only a handful of battles ago, it was still a relatively close fight, and she was a Level X. However, he stood no chance against the robot.

Ace pushed away his nervousness as he stood from his seat. He took a deep breath, hoping in vain it would calm him down. He walked into the arena, the light just as harsh as it had been in his fight against the girl who got possessed during the battle. He kicked up dust in the arena as he walked, his arm up to block the harsh glare from the sun.

RT was on the other side of the arena, its copper skin would've blended in with the sandy walls and ground of the colosseum if not for the shine that reflected off the metal. Its glowing yellow eyes focused on Ace as he came into

view, the gears and inner workings inside it whirring and grinding against each other.

Steam left the crevices between the plating of RT-781, making a sound akin to a train whistle. The sound made goosebumps rise on Ace's skin, his blood running cold as a realization fluttered into his mind. This was no man, no Spirit, no human. It was a machine. It was inorganic. It was calculating and emotionless. It. *It.* RT was created for the sole purpose of killing Spirits, no other design or meaning. Only death to monsters brought about by man.

Ace blinked, digging himself out of the rabbit hole he was spiraling down. He clenched his fist, the metal of his staff absent under his fingers. He'd forgotten it back at the Shaman Base. How hadn't he noticed this oversight in his battle earlier that day? Either way, it was too late to go back for it now.

"Aaaannnnnnnd–" the announcer began, stretching his word for anticipatory effect. "Begin!" As he shouted over the speakers, RT-781 launched like a bullet to Ace.

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Heidi watched from the stands, her eyes focused on the fight at hand. Everything was falling into place. RT just needed to follow the coding. If it did that, then The Rebirth would come, and humanity would feel the pain and

suffering that they deserved. The kill switch in her hand was hidden by the leather pocket of her coat. She could detonate it now, RT *was* in range. She bided her time, however.

Patience was a heavenly virtue, after all.

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Ace felt the iron fist of RT connect with his gut, ripping the air right from his lungs. He sucked in a breath as quick as he could, his lungs burning and feeling like bursting once he did. He ignored it. Ace grabbed the forearm, or what he assumed was the forearm, of RT, igniting his palms with fire the color of sapphire. The flames clawed up its copper skin, biting into the metal and advancing along its limb.

Ace saw the lights in RT-781's eyes flicker, the heat piercing into the inner wiring and messing with its workings. Quickly, the robot pulled its arm away, burying it in the sand, extinguishing the sapphire flames along its metal plating. The grains seeped in through the crevices between the plates of RT-781's copper skin.

The robot pulled its arm out of the ground, grains of the earth rolling down the uneven slope and clustering into a mound on the arena's floor.



Heidi, a trusted professor and Level X. Shaman within the Shaman Society, yawned. She had to admit, the fight was far from the most entertaining of the day. She glanced to the side, seeing people watching the battle between William and Yujiro on their phones over and over, discussing it like it was a sophisticated demonstration of theme and emotion.

She rolled her eyes, returning her gaze to the snoozefest happening in the arena. In one hand she held the switch; in the other she held a device that controlled the intensity of RT-781. She tapped her foot against the ground in irritation. Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she grabbed it, seeing the text from the nameless contact. It read one simple sentence.

"Activate the decoy, Heidi."

This will keep the people entertained, she thought as she turned the knob on the intensifier, cranking up RT-781's to a level beyond the amount its exoskeleton could reasonably handle. She saw the neon light blue light inside RT-781 grow brighter, a visual indicator that it was getting more powerful. She wanted this over quickly.

Patience wasn't her strong suit after all.

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Ace's eyebrows furrowed at the sight in front of him. RT seemed to be… *malfunctioning.* Its body twitched, sparks flying out, the lights of its eyes alternately switching between flickering out and glowing brighter, and the crevices along its joints suddenly letting out a bright blue glow, like a lightbulb being turned on.

He brought his arms up in a guard, as RT twitched and jerked erratically at random intervals. RT's jaw went slack, a sound like TV static emanating from its voice box. Slowly, the sound formed into coherent words. They sent a chill up his spine.

"PROTOCOL SPIRIT: KAMIKAZEE,"

Meanwhile, up in the audience, Heidi pressed the red button of the kill switch. While the others in the stands were confused, wondering what could be happening, she reached into her pocket and texted back the nameless contact.

"Protocol Kamikazee is in action, proceed with The Rebirth."

Chapter 38: Betrayal

RT-781 had been tampered with. The realization came to Ace when the robot began glowing, uttering the protocol that had been programmed into it. A subtle *tick tick tick* echoed from its torso, almost entirely drowned out by the whirring of its workings.

It was rigged to explode.

And he was right in the blast radius.

RT glowed brighter and brighter with each second that passed, the neon blue escaping through any space possible. People were beginning to realize what was happening now, either running, recording, or shouting for someone to do something. But it was too late, it was going to explode, and probably kill Ace when it did.

Calm before the storm. In the moments before the inevitable explosion only a few feet from him, Ace thought back to that night with Liberation, when they set off the bomb at the concert. The first thought tripped dominoes in his mind, of Tommy, of all the people he cared about, of all the people that he could save.

If he was going to die, it was going to be protecting someone he loved. He was going to choose how he went out, and he wasn't going out like this.

Ace created a circular forcefield around him made only of the deep blue fire he controlled. The flames flickered bright, growing in heat and becoming a

light blue color. The color of infinite temperature. The shade of blue at which no matter how much the heat increases, the color remains the same. It began at 14977.594 degrees Kelvin, which roughly translated to 26,500 degrees Fahrenheit. The forcefield was his only chance of protecting himself from the explosion.

Then it happened. The explosion. It rang out across the arena, stretching like a hand of carnage, clutching at the stands and audience, or at least, what was left. Most people had fled the scene, thankfully. The blast ravaged the arena, the shockwave making many people's ears trickle blood.

The man twisted the wrench against the copper bolt; the final one before he could call his creation finished. He tightened it until it couldn't move anymore, until the metal of the plating groaned from the straining he was putting it under. He tossed the wrench to the ground, sliding his arm across his forehead to wipe the sweat off his brow.

Finally finished.

A masterpiece.

It was beautiful, the machine. Its hands were cast of iron, lightbulbs behind its oval eyes. The low whirr of the engine inside its chestplate promised life, and it made the flicker of pride burn among the flame of ambition inside him. He tentatively stepped over to the nearest column; with his rubber glove as a barrier, he held onto the lever, his grip tight and hopeful.

After a moment of anticipation, he pulled down with all his might, sending the power his automata longed for into its engine. Like a zombie from the dead,

his robot twitched and spasmed, rolling around on the workbench where it had rested. Its eyes flickered, finally sending bright yellow beams forward as the bulbs behind its manufactured retinas powered on.

No one believed him. They'd all said it was a mistake, a disaster, a disappointment waiting to happen. Oh, how wrong they were. He would show them. He would show them exactly how wrong they were. He would show them the power he held at his fingertips. This machine, this amalgamation of life and unliving, this defiance to the rules of existence, it would bring pain.

It would kill.

It was RT.

Pandemonium was spreading throughout the colosseum and surrounding buildings, making chaos and discord as abundant as the oxygen in the air. Once the explosion ended, Ace held up his protective shield for a few more seconds, ensuring his safety. Finally, he dropped it, all the muscles he hadn't realized he had tensed suddenly relaxing, aching and pleading to rest.

Ace couldn't feel the burns on his skin, only realizing they were there when his hazel-eyed gaze fell to his arms, where almost every inch of his skin was brutally smothered with third degree burns. The flames he had created were too intense for his body to handle. His ears rang, but he was thankful to feel the absence of blood when he brought his hand up to them.

Through the dull ringing and pandemoniacal screams of the Shamans, he heard a voice. A voice he recognized as belonging to Heidi. He turned,

scouring the crumbling stands for the woman, finding her standing with an unsettling calm, a stark contrast to the anarchy of their surroundings.

"Heidi?" Ace called out, his voice speaking for him in that moment. He had a feeling, deep in his gut, that he knew what was happening, why she was eerily tranquil, but another part of him denied it. His doubt was quickly overthrown when she responded to him.

"That is not my name, Ace Hawkins. I have no name." Suddenly, her form began to change, her limbs becoming lankier and her features sharper, her skin becoming transparent. "For Spirits have no name." Ace didn't have to see his own face to know it was pale, frozen in shock. But the sight seemed to amuse the woman–the Spirit.

"I am a Spirit born from fears not of man, but of Spirits. I am the Fear Spirit of *Shamans*, the innate fear and hatred that all Spirits feel for Shamans incarnated into one physical form and being."

The hairs on the back of Ace's neck rose, sending goosebumps across every inch of his skin that was not burned. "What?" Ace said, more to himself than to her–it. With the adrenaline now fading from his body, his wounds began to ache, throbbing with a burning pain.

"I thought you were brighter, Ace," It said, ignoring Ace's rhetorical stunned question. "I'm surprised you didn't catch the connection, that Liberation was working for us the entire time. Gunnar truly was easy to manipulate, so angry and vengeful, so willing to do anything just for the purpose of ruining the life of someone else. It's respectable, truly, but he was nothing to us but a tool to buy time."

“W-who’s *us*? A-and buy time for *what*?” Ace stuttered, feeling powerless for the first time since the bomb went off. His third degree burns spread from the tips of his fingers on his left hand all the way up his arm and shoulder, and ending on his left chest and shoulder blade.

The Spirit *tsk tsk tsked* at his questions, shaking its head. “Us? My, Ace, I thought you’d put two and two together. I am working with the one and only, the Fear Spirit of *Death*. Have been for some time now, long before *you* were in the picture,” she said with disdain, looking him over. “And buying time? For the Rebirth, of course. The Spirit of Control warned you, did it not?”

Ace looked at his feet, his eyes blinking rapidly. He opened his mouth to say something, but his tongue was tied in his mouth. His eyes narrowed upon seeing shadows spread across the arena’s ground, like hundreds of thousands of small clouds suddenly appearing in the sky and blocking out the sun.

“It’s time,” Heidi said ominously, looking up to the sky, the sun almost entirely blocked out, drenching the world in a thick dim shadow. Ace hesitantly looked up, his eyes widening to the size of saucers upon seeing the terror above him.

Spirits. Hundreds of thousands of Spirits. Of all sizes, manifesting their power. They covered the sun, overlapping their transparent skin to make a cloud-like barrier between the light and the earth. Each and every one of their faces was twisted into a wicked expression, sharp-toothed grins and angular eyes molded into glares. There were even Spirits he recognized. Among the sea of Emotion Spirits, he spotted many Fear based ones. Weaving among the Spirits, slithering like a python in the air, was the Fear Spirit of Blood.

It didn’t make any sense: he was seeing Spirits he had seen disintegrate. William *had* told him that Fear Spirits came back, but that was only after five months at the earliest, a time frame that should’ve left all the Spirits that he had watched turn to dust still dead.

Something wasn’t adding up, but he would deal with that after the army of Spirits was dead.

Chapter 39: Rebirth I

Fear was its creator. Fear made its mind think, its claws sharp, its eyes see. Fear was its lifeblood, the power to a machine, the heart to an animal, the sunlight to a plant. Only with fear did it become a reality. In moments, the Spirit went from an idea to a phenomenon, a creature, a beast.

It was in some sort of dungeon–no, a morgue–with another thing like it standing there. The other Spirit had the body of a skeleton, two flames, like a candle, floating in its eye sockets, and a black robe draped over its skeletal form.

It knew who the Spirit was, it was the Fear Spirit of Death, the most powerful Spirit to ever have existed and to ever exist. "Welcome back," the Spirit of Death said, the voice raspy and androgynous despite not having any vocal cords and the hand extended, bony and yellow in the dim light.

It opened its mouth to speak, only for the Spirit of Death to interrupt. "You want to kill Shamans, to dismantle everything they've made. That is a fact, a common trait among all Spirits." That was true, it wanted to destroy Shamans, along with any human it came across. They were weak, pitiful, and emotional, everything that held society back. "I have a plan to kill them all, you just have to follow my commands, deal?"

William sliced one of the Spirits in half with his silver sword. Despite having worn himself out during his battle with Yujiro, he recovered quickly, partially thanks to the new infusion of adrenaline rushing through his veins. He flew through the air on a surfboard of metal, barely wasting a second to kill each Spirit that came his way.

Yujiro was doing the same, fairly close while still keeping his distance. He soared through the air with his dove wings, his katana razor sharp as it sliced and diced the Spirits, each one varying in color. Most of them were Emotion based Spirits, but there were handfuls of Fear Spirits. However, not everything was going as well as William and Yujiro made it seem. Below them, many of the Shamans were struggling to fend off the hordes of Spirits surrounding them.

Marisella was one of them. The lack of abundant water, combined with her injuries, was adding up, weighing down on her and making it hard to hold off the Spirits. There wasn't anyone to help her; the other Shamans were preoccupied with their own Spirits or running away from the discord in a desperate attempt to find safety.

The Fear Spirit of Stalkers crept up behind her, while she was focusing her beam of water on an Emotion Spirit in front of her, the Spirit dodging her slugging motions with unexpected grace and elegance. It held a kitchen knife in its gloved hand, the tip already stained red with the blood of other Shamans.

"Not on my watch!" William shouted, manipulating the metal of the knife's blade to send it right back into the hand of the Spirit, sending it up its arm and carving into the translucent flesh. The Spirit let out a sound in agonizing pain, becoming dust and blowing away in the wind.

With the kitchen knife still under his control, William sent it flying straight through the Emotion Spirit's head, evaporating it in an instant. He descended on his iron surfboard, landing gracefully next to Marisella, wiping sweat from his brow, and a grin across his pale face.

"This is therapeutic, is it not?" he asked, panting out breaths. Marisella, her face ridden with cuts and bruises, both from her battle and from the overwhelming horde of Spirits, gave him quizzical once over, looking at him like he'd suddenly grown another set of arms. "I'll take that as a no," William added in her silence.

Ace, meanwhile, was still in the dead center of the arena, largely incapacitated from his extensive burns that sent a sharp pain deep inside him whenever he tried to move or take a breath. It was torture. Both William and Yujiro noticed this at the same time, Yujiro using a copied Blessing to send a message into William's mind. *Cover for me, I'm coming down,* it said, and that was all it had to.

Yujiro descended from the sky, while William propelled himself further into the sky on his surfboard, mercilessly killing more Spirits as he diverted their attention to himself. As Yujiro switched to a different copied Blessing–healing touch–and began to melt away Ace's burns, William took to the sky.

William took a piece off his surfboard, reshaping it into an arrow. He threw the arrow, launching it right through the chest of a Spirit and piercing into the arm of another. He controlled the still airborne bolt, the metal soaring through the air almost as if it were alive, zipping right through Spirits and killing them

in an instant, tens of hundreds of the millions that were flooding the sky becoming nothing but ash and dust.

Ace felt his body being put through all forms of pain at once. Searing, burning, aching, pounding, stinging, dull. It was an agonizing torture, one he would gladly go the entire rest of his life without experiencing ever again. Yet, as Yujiro continued to keep his palm on the burns, they began to disappear, his skin magically repairing itself and returning to the milky pale color. It was amazing. And as his burns went away, so did the pain; finally his muscles untensed as the excruciating pain subsided.

With the pain washed away, Ace rose, ready to fight. Yujiro's healing had not only rid him of his pain, but his exhaustion along with it, bringing him back almost to his full strength. Ace clenched his fists, creating fire in them and letting it build up under his fingers. He got a running start, releasing his grip with his hands behind him. The force launched him in the air, putting him right in front of a crowd of levitating Spirits. Right where he wanted to be.

He brought his hands forward, releasing pillars of engulfing flame from his callouses. The deep blue fire incinerating the Spirits in an instant, their remains just ash and dust. Now with nothing keeping him in the air, he began to fall. Thankfully, he caught himself before he hit the ground, slowing his descent in the last few yards using fire from his hands. As he landed safely on the sand, he was joined by other Shamans.

The group consisted mostly of Shamans he didn't recognize while some had come with him in the limo. Missing from the group was Theodora, whom he hadn't seen since they all left the car and entered the colosseum.

He would regroup with her later. For now, he needed a breather. He didn't look like the only one either. Practically all of the Shamans looked as though they could pass out on the spot, with the exception of Yujiro and William. Ace took a deep breath in, feeling as at peace as he could in the moment, the dust from fallen Spirits swirling in the wind.

All seemed well, until that is, the dust began clumping together, regrouping and reforming. The Spirits were reanimating right in front of their eyes, surrounding all of them.

Chapter 40: Rebirth II

Ace's eyes, along with those of the other Shamans in the group, widened in shock. The dust magically connected and wove together in the air, molding into the figure of the Spirits they had just killed. Yujiro muttered something under his breath in Japanese, drawing his katana. William did the same, drawing his sword, which lacked its usual gleam from the now hidden sun.

A wicked laugh that made the Shamans gasp echoed from the stands of the arena. Looking up, Ace's eyes landed on a Spirit. Heidi. Its mouth was puppeted into a sharp-toothed smile, its eyes narrowed in delight at the unfortunate position of the Shamans below.

"Behold!" it exclaimed, sounding more monstrous with every word passing its transparent lips. "Behold the power of the Fear Spirit of Death! Let every Spirit you kill be revived and rejuvenated in front of your pitiful eyes!" It sounded like Frankenstein revealing its monster, spreading its arms open like a grand performer.

The Shamans readied themselves, including Ace and Marisella. "If the Fear Spirit of Death is reviving the Spirits every time they die, then we need to kill it," Marisella said, her darker skin still covered with fresh cuts and bruises from man and monster alike. Her voice wasn't as strong as it had been days ago; her words noticeably strained as they passed her lips.

Anatoly nodded, his words stoic and largely emotionless despite the desperation of their situation. “I can hold them at bay when they’re locked in the talisman.” He reached down to his left wrist, a collection of ten bracelets wrapped around his forearm. Each bracelet had about eleven talismans, all in the form of metal balls.

“You do that, the rest of us can protect you,” Ace said, feeling a surge of hope flow through him because of Anatoly. He clenched his fists, causing orange and red flames to curl around his hand. He wasn’t going to take any chances burning himself again as he did when he used blue fire, especially after feeling the excruciating pain of the charred skin and seeing the torment of Yujiro’s healing.

Finally, the Spirits were fully formed, their bodies exactly as they had been before they became dust. They were like predators surrounding their prey, their motions slow, but not in a cautious way, in a way that leveraged the advantage the Spirits had. The Spirits were toying with them.

“Capture when ready, Anatoly,” William said, his sword drawn and guard up. Anatoly did a quick nod, taking the talismans off the bracelets on his wrists and holding them tightly. Slowly, meticulously, as though any wrong step could result in death, the Spirits crept closer, most of them levitating inches off the ground. Anatoly’s stoic expression darted back and forth among the crowd of Spirits surrounding the group.

In an instant, Anatoly threw the talismans, a cluster of them coming into direct contact with some of the closer Spirits. Most of the talismans, however, fell to the ground, missing their targets. William was quick to act as well, using

his Blessing to send them into the air and encase a handful of Spirits lunging at Anatoly and other Shamans who had their backs turned.

The other Shamans did the same as William, fending off the oncoming barrage of Spirits. Thankfully, most of them were low ranked, something Ace could assume by how quickly and easily they fell. The Spirits were being mowed down, dying by the lot. However, every time they would kill a Spirit, like a Hydra, two more came out of nowhere. Ace could tell the situation was getting more dire by the minute.

To make matters worse, Anatoly's supply of talismans was dwindling, the usable number dropping like a slope covered in ice. For every Spirit that got trapped in one of his talismans, all the other Shamans would have to kill five times as many. They needed a better plan, and fast. Ace made a checklist in his mind, going over anything and everything they could do to help them, but any idea that came to mind was shot down in an instant.

He felt exhaustion creeping up on him, his muscles beginning to ache with every bout of flame that left his palms, his body silently begging him to rest, to let his heavy eyelids fall. He pushed on, desperately searching his mind for something to give him strength, something to help him survive.

He looked up with hazel eyes, as if looking through the crowd of monstrous Spirits would help him see what he needed to power his strength, to feed his motivation, to keep his blood pumping and heart beating. At first his search was in vain–nothing but his fellow Shamans, exhaustion bringing them down as well, and Spirits. He was about to tear his eyes away, until he saw something that should've been impossible.

Between the gaps of monsters, he saw them. His parents. Like ghosts they stood, not truly there yet being just as real as if they were. His father was noticeably taller than his mother, his arm around her shoulder and keeping her close to him. As his eyes focused on the two people, faces he didn't recognize yet knew by heart, he began to see himself.

His father shared his eyes, his softer facial features, the lopsided smile, even his aquiline nose. His mother, on the other hand, shared his pale and clear skin, his rosy cheeks, and the silky brown hair he'd cut short for as long as he could remember. He felt a tear prick the edge of his eye, and in a single blink,

Gone.

It was enough, he'd found his motivation, his desire to continue pushing, the entire reason he had joined the Shaman Society in the first place, the entire reason he embraced the sight of Spirits instead of cowering in fear at the thought of them like he once did. He felt the fire crackling in his palms burn with a newfound brightness, using the sight of his parents as an everlasting fuel. He felt his flames go from red and orange to white, a wall of heat engulfing the Spirits and protecting the Shamans, a border walling their aggressors out.

Yujiro wasted no time, speaking the words they were all thinking. "We don't have time to waste, we need to think of a plan. *Fast*." His voice was firm and sturdy, making Ace feel a twinge, a longing for the time not too long ago when Yujiro was bubbly and upbeat, showing him the ropes of Shamanism.

No one, however, spoke. The only sounds were the crackling of the white fire wall and the distorted roars of the Spirits surrounding it. That is, however, until Marisella broke the silence.

“I’ve got an idea,”

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“Oh come *on*!” Heidi shouted, its voice, a mix of commanding and complaining, reaching even the farthest walls of the colosseum. “It’s not that hard, all you have to do is extinguish that damn fire!”

The Spirits clawed harder at the wall of fire, burning their fingertips and making the transparent skin black with char. Heidi rolled its eyes, cursing under its breath, adding on some words about how useless other Spirits were with a shake of its head.

It took out its phone, texting the nameless contact. *“The dirty Shamans are still alive, these Spirits are one step above useless.”* It put the phone back in its pocket, knowing that the contact wouldn’t be happy with the fact the Shamans still lived, but it would be dealt with soon enough.

Finally, as Heidi looked up, a Spirit managed to claw through the fire wall, its hand almost burning off in the process. Heidi grinned, its sharp teeth forming a malicious expression. Following suit, the other Spirits began to

enlarge the opening, until the wall of fire was completely dismantled, now nothing but ash and sparks.

The victory was short-lived. As the Spirits, Heidi included, looked to where the Shamans were, they saw nothing, only a hole in the bricks of the wall.

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Marisella led the group of Shamans, running down the abandoned streets of the city block that housed the colosseum-like arena. Apparently, when Marisella was thrown against the wall of the arena in her fight, she had loosened the bricks of the wall, the wall they had coincidentally been trapped against. She thanked her luck as she continued to run from the Spirits that would no doubt realize they were gone sooner rather than later.

Once they were far enough away from the arena to consider themselves safe, they hid in an alleyway and took their breath, Yujiro healing the more major injuries and exhaustion of the Shamans in the group. Marisella's eyes trailed over everyone, and she made sure to count who was with them. Ace, William, Yujiro, Anatoly, the Shaman Heidi defeated in the arena, and some other Shaman she couldn't put a name to.

“Wait, where’s Celeste and Theodora?” she asked, only realizing it after doing a headcount. William looked up, scanning the crowd and making the same discovery.

“I’m not sure,” his voice trailed off for a moment before he picked it up again. “If I had to guess, Celeste and Theodora are probably with each other, and that’s more than enough for their own defense.

“For now, we only need to keep ourselves alive.”

Chapter 41: Rebirth III

“If we split up, then we’ll have better chances of finding the Fear Spirit of Death,” William explained once everyone with noticeable injuries had been healed by Yujiro. “If we find the Spirit of Death, we can kill it, which will prevent all the other Spirits from reviving. Then everything will be all fine.”

Ace nodded, but he had a nagging feeling that William was wrong. He had the smallest twinge of belief at the edge of his mind telling him that something–anything–could or would go wrong, he just didn’t know what. He almost voiced his concern, but all the other Shamans in their group seemed to wholeheartedly put their trust in William’s plan, following it without question.

Their trust didn’t put him at ease.

The alleyway was uncomfortable and cramped, with barely enough room for the seven people occupying it. Dirty water dripped from the gutters, which were filled to the brim with discarded sticks, leaves, and other gunk that had been collecting for a long time. The smell of rotten trash and the squeaks of scurrying rats didn’t improve the atmosphere either.

William split the Shamans into two groups, one group comprising Ace, the Shaman who defeated Marisella, the Shaman defeated by Heidi, and himself. Yujiro, Anatoly, and Marisella formed the other group. Once the groups were

situated, Yujiro's group set off. William's group waited in the grimy alleyway, then left in the opposite direction.

Spirits were running rampant in the sky above them, their transparent skin tainted with crimson blood. The shrieks of both man and monster flooded the streets, sending adrenaline rushing through the Shamans' blood with every beat of fear in their hearts. Then they heard a familiar voice overhead yell at Spirits, and saw a transparent finger pointing at the running Shamans.

"Get them!"

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Yujiro heard the shout of Heidi telling Spirits to attack William's group in the distance. Despite the almost overwhelming concern he felt for the group, especially William, he pushed on, knowing they could hold themselves in extreme situations. His eyes focused on the area in front of him. It looked like the world was falling apart, parts of buildings crumbling and crashing down on civilians and Shamans alike.

"I-IT'S ABOUT TIME I G-GOT MY REMATCH," boomed a glitched voice like an announcer over an intercom, sounding slightly static-y. The Shamans stopped, searching the nearby buildings for the source of the voice.

Yujiro recognized the voice, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Then it clicked.

He realized exactly what it was, just as the Fear Spirit of Public Speaking came into view, its skin pale as a corpse's and eyes as manic as they were the day he'd killed it with Ace. Its mouth was still the woofer of a speakerbox, pulsing slightly whenever words left its mouth. Yujiro's eyes narrowed, as he drew his katana. He held the grip between both hands, letting his foot go back a few inches to get a better stance against the Spirit.

If it had a mouth, it would've grinned. "TH-THIS TIME, I W-WON'T BE ALONE," it said, its voice still glitching and stuttering. On cue, a futuristic flying saucer appeared behind the Spirit, a glass dome on top revealing a green transparent alien-looking creature.

The Fear Spirit of Aliens, no joke. Marisella stepped forward, taking moisture from the air and making rings of water around her wrists, ready to shoot them if needed. "Need some help?" she asked as she approached. Yujiro looked back only for a second to meet her gaze, a smile forming on his lips.

"It would be appreciated."

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Ace looked back, despite knowing exactly who owned the voice. It was Heidi, and it had an army of Spirits behind it, each one snarling with twisted expressions. Heidi aimed its pointer finger directly at Ace, siccing the Spirits towards him and his group of Shamans. At Heidi's command, the horde of Spirits descended from the sky and rushed toward the group, claws extended and jaws wide open.

William drew his sword, slicing the closest Spirit in half. After a moment, the other Shamans, including Ace, joined in, attacking the Spirits and fending them off. William knew, as he sliced the Spirits into dust and sent metal through their transparent skin, that the Spirits would be reviving soon enough and that they couldn't hold them back for long.

"Ace! Do you think you could make an explosion so we can make a run for it?!" William yelled, his voice barely projecting to his friend over the screeches of dying Spirits and the attacks of Shamans.

"I can if you cover me!" Ace yelled back, William nodded, making eye contact with determination flaring up in his irises. The other Shamans worked harder as Ace relented his flames. If he was going to make this explosion, he needed some charge time.

He clenched his fists tight enough to make his knuckles go white, his fingertips getting lightly charred and covered with soot as the yellow and white flames built up in his palm, the pressure begging to be released.

"Almost there, just need a little more time," Ace said, as the other Shamans struggled to hold back the Spirits. He noticed their movements slowly

becoming more sluggish, beads of sweat forming on their foreheads, and their chest movements becoming more forced as their breaths became heavier.

Ace felt the power build up in his grip to almost its maximum capacity, the heat sending a slight burning sensation through his fingers and down his palm to his wrists. He faced his closed hands towards the Spirits, the Shamans getting the message immediately. They stopped attacking and stood back, thankfully just out of range as the explosion of flames erupted from Ace's hands.

A loud *BOOM* rang out as a mix of white and yellow light launched straight at the Spirits, barely giving them a moment to react before they were melted to ash. Ace subconsciously licked his chapped lips, the fire having robbed his mouth of its moisture, and tasted the faint tang of ash on his tongue. He felt a twinge of disgust at the taste, but he had more pressing matters.

Heidi.

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Marisella, Yujiro, and Anatoly were hiding in an alleyway, fear making their hearts want to jump out of their chests. The Fear Spirit of Public Speaking had fallen quickly enough, especially when the new Shamans came out of

nowhere to help them. But the celebration was short-lived, as the Fear Spirit of Aliens killed the new Shamans in seconds.

It was a terrifying sight, the deaths of the Shamans. The Spirit had sent a beam down from its spaceship, the laser stripping them of their skin, then muscle, and all the way down to the bone, their skeletons now littered on the streets as the subtle beeps and whirs of the spaceship grew louder and fainter while the Spirit searched for the three.

“What’s the plan? We can’t just run out there, or we’ll end up like the others,” Marisella asked, conveying a sense of hopelessness about the situation. She bit her tongue, racking her brain for any possible solutions as the others did the same.

Anatoly was out of Talismans, all of them still on the arena ground. Even if he did have one, it wouldn’t work because the glass dome would shield the Spirit itself. Yujiro’s seemingly endless arsenal of Blessings was as good as nothing, too, none of them tailored to this situation. As Marisella heard the noises from the saucer grow louder, she hoped and prayed that it wouldn’t see them again.

Marisella’s eyes traced the dome of the saucer as it passed. It looked like something taken right out of a sci-fi book, with neon orbs on dark gray metal pulsating like a beating heart, letting out futuristic noises every few seconds. She felt hopeless, until she looked closer at the dome on the saucer. There was a crack, a miniscule, almost imperceptible, crack in the glass.

A weak point.

This was her chance. She just had to hit that part of the glass before the Spirit could see them and launch the evaporating beam. She gathered moisture from the air and some from her own body, chapping her lips and making her mouth parched. She gathered it in a ball, carefully aiming towards the crack in the dome and steadying her shaking hands.

She narrowed her eyes, and a beat passed before she launched the bolt of water.

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The Shamans ran from lightning bolt after lightning bolt from the saucer, each one fortunately missing and instead striking the concrete, sending up debris. As soon as they turned the corner, Heidi stopped throwing the lightning, presumably conserving its energy. William looked up, seeing Marisella, Anatoly, and Yujiro huddled in an alleyway, a flying saucer crashing onto the street and erupting into flames, a Spirit becoming dust inside the glass dome.

Yujiro met William's gaze after tearing his eyes away from the futuristic train wreck. He beckoned his group over. The four Shamans moved over to the others, regrouping. "Any luck?" Anatoly asked them, his voice still stoic despite the situation.

“Unfortunately no, and I assume the same for you three?” William responded, sitting against the wall and sliding down to the ground, resting against the grimy brick. Yujiro shook his head, as the rest of the Shamans joined William in rest. Ace looked over at the crashed UFO, his hairs standing on end when he realized there was someone emerging from the remnants.

No, not a someone. A something. A terrible something.

Chapter 42: Death's Door

Panic. Dread. Terror. Horror. They all pulsated through Ace with every quickened beat of his heart. The figure emerging from the UFO elicited all those feelings and more, a shiver darting down his spine like it never had before, every hair on his body standing on end. He felt like he could collapse on the spot from the gaze of the flickers of dim brightness in its hollow eyes.

It was the Fear Spirit of Death. It brought him back to the first time he'd seen it, while he and Yujiro were driving after defeating the Fear Spirit of Public Speaking. It seemed forever ago now, despite it only being a few months since then. Its skull head was illuminated by the fire on the destroyed saucer, the pitch black cloak covering its skeletal form remaining free from the flames.

An unseen force was freezing Ace. Despite the urge to comply with it, he resisted, flexing his fingers and forcing his lungs to take in air. He managed to turn his head enough to look at the other Shamans, all of them having laid their eyes on the same sight.

Most seemed largely unaffected. However, Marisella appeared to be on the more frightened end of the spectrum, and Yujiro looked completely frozen, his skin pale as a ghost and his eyes wide as saucers. He was no doubt having flashbacks of his parents, and the Fear Spirit of Death was taking full

advantage of that. The Spirit spoke, its voice raspy and androgynous, the words making the air seem colder despite the crackling fire.

“Scared?” It asked, nothing more. It didn’t need to. With the single word, an aura of confidence emanated from the Spirit, backed up by almost imperceptible strength. The flames in its eye sockets grew brighter as it reached a bony hand out, grabbing at nothing. Gray winds that made sounds like cries of pain seeped from the damaged concrete on which the Spirit stood, and Ace swore he could see faces of agony in the winds as they shaped into a scythe in the Fear Spirit’s hand.

“You Shamans are all the same. You claim to be all good and brave, yet crumble to ruin when brushed with death,” It said, its eyes going to the metal of the scythe’s blade, which gleamed despite the hidden sun. The words made Ace angry, his fists clenching and summoning a layer of fire around the skin of his hands without him even realizing it. The others also readied themselves for the inevitable battle.

The Fear Spirit was unfazed, even letting out a raspy chuckle that spiraled into a humiliating maniacal laugh at them. After a short moment, the Spirit stopped laughing, wiping a non-existent tear from its eye to add to the disrespect. “None of you stand a chance against me, not even Theodora, the supposed ‘strongest Shaman alive’.” It paused, then continued. “Death is inevitable, ergo the fear of it is the most powerful,”

Yujiro remained frozen, the dread too powerful in him. William, however, could move and used that movement to draw his sword. “You all stay back, I

can handle it if you can keep Yujiro safe," he said, stepping in front of Yujiro in a protective manner, while also confronting the Fear Spirit of Death.

"You really believe I'd fight you instead of letting the puny Spirits do the work for me? You humans truly *are* foolish," with that as the Spirit's goodbye, it disappeared in a cloud of thick black smoke. In place of Fear Spirit of Death came four new Spirits, Spirits most of the Shamans recognized in an instant.

The first took the shape of a spider–a black widow–at least nine feet tall, venom snarling from its mouth and dripping down to the broken concrete. Its eight beady red eyes stared directly at William, its eight legs fixing themselves on the ground as it prepared to fight him. It didn't take a genius to tell it was the Fear Spirit of Spiders; the thought of the arachnids made Ace shiver in discomfort.

The second Spirit looked to be mostly human, though its head mimicked the dark and cloudy sky, while its eyes were as white as a clear cloud on a bright blue morning. The rest of its body was made of rock, jagged and uneven in form, resembling a cliffside. It opened its mouth to let out a snarl, the noise sounding like a hurricane. William knew this Fear Spirit personally, having killed it some time before Ace's arrival in the Shaman Base. It was the Fear Spirit of Falling.

The third Spirit was just a cloud of smoke and shadow, neon red eyes peering out from inside of it. Claws extended out, each one sharper than any razor William had ever seen before and with a bony finger. Its breathing was ragged, as though its lung had been punctured and the hole continually leaked . He didn't have to recognize it to know it was the Fear Spirit of the Dark.

Finally, his eyes fell on the fourth and final Spirit. It was a cloud of scribbles and TV static that seemed to roll on for infinity, covering and overtaking his gaze the longer he looked at it. It was a big ball of haze, of uncertainty, of doubt, of anonymity. Of unknowingness.

The Fear Spirit of Death had assembled in one place the four most powerful recorded Spirits: Spiders, Falling, Darkness, and the Unknown. He felt a twinge of dread in his gut, his sweaty palms grip the handle of his sword tighter. He made sure his breathing was even as the realization came to him.

This was a life or death battle.

Chapter 43: Fear

“Run while you can! Find the Fear Spirit of Death and make sure its head is on a silver platter for me when I’m finished with these goons!” William shouted, sounding more confident than he felt tenfold. He felt his knees shaking, his mind screaming at him to run away. But he refused. He kept himself steady, swordpoint directed at the four monstrous Spirits. He needed to protect Yujiro, Ace, everyone. He couldn’t do that if he was cowering in fear, he would only prove Death right.

None of them could move, either too engaged with the battle about to ensue in front of them, or paralyzed in fright. William’s eyes darted between the four Spirits. He shifted his hold on the grip of his sword, trying to keep his cool on the outside even if he was collapsing from fear on the inside. He knew he couldn’t stand off against the Spirits forever, one party was going to make an attack, and he wasn’t going to be at a disadvantage by letting them get the first hit in.

He dashed forward, sword slicing at the closest Spirit to him, the Fear Spirit of Spiders. It tried to stab him with the point of one leg, but William sliced the appendage in two, drawing out an agonizing scream from the Spirit. He slid under the arachnid’s abdomen, slicing its other legs and cutting open its stomach as he reached the other side of it.

The Spirit fell to the ground, letting out sounds of agony and wriggling its stumps, trying to use the legs it no longer had. The Falling Spirit tried to grab William, but he did a flip out of the way, splitting his sword into segments and sending the one with the sword point into the Spider Spirit, grappling onto it. With a finishing blow, he severed its head from the rest of its body, ending the noises coming from it in an instant.

Three left.

He looked back, but didn't have time to move out of the way before the Falling Spirit grabbed his torso. In the blink of an eye, the wind blew his hair back as he free fell from hundreds of feet in the air, the broken concrete road rapidly coming closer to him. He had to think quickly. There wasn't nearly enough iron in his blood to make anything he could manipulate, and channeling it while it was still in his blood could cut off circulation and burst veins. His sword!

He realized it was still on the ground, the Falling Spirit having a rocky foot on the blade to prevent him from pulling it up. Time was running out. What had metal? Think, think! His eyes traveled desperately along the cracked road, landing on water shooting out from a burst pipeline. That's it! He manipulated the metal of the pipelines under the concrete–a few thousand more dollars to repair the damages was nothing compared to millions of lives–and made it into a skateboard ramp with a separate skateboard already on it for him.

With an excited yell, he descended onto the skateboard, sliding down the ramp made of copper, which he sourced from the generous water pipes under the street, and safely landed. He sent the skateboard right into the Falling

Spirit's ankle, grabbing his sword with no problem as the Spirit's leg collapsed like a rockslide.

Now having his confidence regained and fear subsided with the sword in his hand, he faced the Spirits, exuding an almost egotistical aura.

William was a scrawny boy, all skin and bones. Bandages and band-aids cluttered every inch of his pale skin. He sniffled as he wiped the welled up tears in his eyes with the palm of his hand. His textbooks, notebooks, and practically every school supply he had were thrown in the fountain at the front of the school, the sound of flowing water drowned out by the cruel and humiliating laughs of the bullies behind him.

He knew they were calling him harsh words, but the boy had grown numb to them, too pained by the repeated debilitating phrases to let the cuts bleed anew. They'd ranged from making fun of his appearance to his personality to who he hung out with, anything they could get their grubby little minds on they would use against him.

He felt the calloused hands of a boy grades above him shove him into the fountain. He splashed in the water, which was barely ankle height, even for the short boy. Thankfully, all the injuries he received were some scrapes on his arm and knees. He felt tears streaming down his face like they would never end, mixing in with the flowing water of the stone fountain.

A Shaman Mark formed on his earlobe as the phrases and hurtful words repeated themselves in his mind like a wicked mantra. He opened his eyes,

managing to make out the words engraved into the fountain through a blurry gaze.

"PREVENTING BULLYING AND KEEPING CAMPUS SAFE FOR ALL!" It read.

How painfully ironic.

Ace watched in awe as William fought the Spirits almost effortlessly, piercing transparent skin with his silver blade and weaving between attacks like it was a dance and not a brutal fight. He had completely forgotten that the other Shamans were still standing by his side, so Anatoly's voice startled him, jolting his shoulders.

"He's the strongest Shaman active, y'know," he said. Ace managed to tear his eyes away from the dance of clashing swords and fists to look at Anatoly. "Out of every single Shaman in the country, William is the strongest one that's both alive and active, if anyone had to fight these four, it would have to be him."

Ace didn't know how to respond to that. Yes, he was aware William was strong, but he didn't realize that he was *that* much more powerful than all the other Shamans currently active. He just turned his head back to William, watching the battle continue.

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William felt the exhaustion claiming him, his slashes and slices had become more and more weakened as time and time again he was plunged into darkness or sent hundreds of feet in the air. On top of that, he could see the Spider Spirit reassembling out of the corner of his eye. Just another weight on his shoulders he would have to carry.

Anatoly, Marisella, and the other two Shamans he'd forgotten the names of had left, presumably, to find the Fear Spirit of Death and kill it. Ace and Yujiro, however, had stayed behind, unable to look away from the faltering William. William felt desperate as he lugged his sword, the metal feeling heavy in his sweating palms.

He felt an excruciating pain beyond description come through his body, his eyes drawed downward, widening at the leg of the Spider Spirit–rejuvenated into pristine condition–having pierced his chest. He dropped his sword onto the ground, trying to shout for help, but no sound came from his mouth, only the sickly metallic taste of blood as it poured out of his open jaw.

The Spirit brought its limb out of his body, leaving a gaping wound in his torso. His opened hands grasped at his chest, his fingers going into the gap of his flesh. He looked up, seeing his lover and his friends, then staggered and fell to the ground, the life leaving his form. He knew at that moment it would be the final time he saw them all.

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“William!” Yujiro shouted, escaping from the paralyzing fear that had encapsulated his legs only moments ago and running straight to the collapsed William. The Spirits dashed away, leaving the three boys to themselves. Yujiro had tears streaming down his face before he even got halfway to William, the other boy’s skin already getting pale.

Yujiro fell to his knees by William’s side, clutching at the boy's shoulders. “William, please! Please talk to me! Tell me you’re alive!” He pleaded, shaking him. William coughed weakly, blood staining his ghostly white hand. His eyes went from his palm to Yujiro, and he felt his gaze soften. He brought his clean hand to Yujiro’s cheek, cupping it gently and rubbing the skin with his thumb.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you longer,” William muttered, his voice strained from ragged breaths. He paused, taking in a shaky breath to steel himself, tears prickling the corners of his eyes. “Thank you for bringing so much joy to my life, I didn’t deserve you.”

“No, no, don’t say that, you’re gonna be okay. I’m gonna heal you, and everything is gonna be fine, everything is gonna be alright.” Yujiro fumbled with his hands, starting to heal William’s chest wound. Unexpectedly, however, he was stopped by William’s hand on his wrist.

“Don’t. Save your strength. I’m a lost cause,” William said, an aching look of love and loss making up his expression. “I love you, Yujiro, don’t forget that when I’m dead.” With that, he lifted his head up just enough to kiss Yujiro. He held it, both boys shutting their eyes as seconds passed in slow motion. William’s hand went limp, and his head fell back down to the ground, his body giving in to his wounds.

Yujiro soaked his tears in William’s shirt, clutching onto it and pleading in broken whispers for William not to leave him, to come back to him and stay at his side.

He never would.

Chapter 44: Second Awakening

William was dead. He had decades left of life left in him, decades that would have been spent with Yujiro, Ace, and all those that he cared about and cared about him. There were thousands of things he would never experience because those years had been taken from him. And those Spirits had enjoyed stripping the boy of his life.

The fact was sinking in Ace’s gut like an anchor, only it did the opposite of grounding him. He felt like he could barely breathe, having to force each and

every pained breath in and out of his lungs. His heart felt like it was beating in every inch of his form–his arms, his chest, against his skull, nowhere was free of it.

His blood felt scalding in his veins, each monotonous pump of his heart echoing through his mind like a slow and powerful drum. He felt blood begin to flood his mouth, his lips a dam forbidding its exit. His eyes were seeing doubles, and he staggered backwards, feeling a sudden weakness.

Then, all of a sudden, he felt renewed power, more power than he ever had before. It was overwhelming–like he was being pulled apart and crushed at the same time–drawing out a cry of agony, but the sound was drowned out by spilling blood.

Ace collapsed on the ground as the strength of newfound power tore his body apart.

"On Second Awakenings," a document written by Theodora and locked away somewhere in the Shaman Base.

"There is still much mystery behind Second Awakenings, their origins, and their causes. This article will be updated as new information is obtained or discovered, so proceed with caution and read with a grain of skepticism.

The process of obtaining your Second Awakening blessing is the most agonizing experience on this planet. It inflicts pain on both the mind and body, and a majority of recorded cases have resulted in the death of the person enduring such torture. The process is not for the faint of heart. I am lucky to have survived. Few Second Awakening Blessings (as my advisor, Celeste

Moreau, has deemed them) have been properly catalogued, due to the mysterious and dangerous nature of them. However, it is known that Second Awakening Blessings, seeming to be divine in origin, are extraordinarily more powerful than even the strongest standard Blessing. A list of the known ones is provided below.

***Celestialism**: The ability to control and manipulate light, which includes creating it, destroying it, changing objects and oneself into orbs of pure light, and increasing its temperature up to ~10,000 degrees Fahrenheit/~5500 Celsius. (Oddly, regardless of temperature, the light remains a golden yellow color. More extensive research will be conducted in future). The most recent recorded case of Celestialism is Theodora, myself, in the late 2010s.*

***Cosmic Control:** The ability to control and manipulate fire, water, ice, air, rock, and gravity. This is by far one of the Blessings with the highest potential. Shamans who master Cosmic Control, I believe will rank most powerful in history. The most recent recorded case is Elijah in the mid 1850s.*

***Creation:** The ability to create anything from thin air, in any place within sight. The larger or denser the object, the more energy is required to make it. The most recent recorded case is Nova Harrison in the early 2020s.*

***Luck Manipulation:** The ability to change the odds of a phenomenon or scenario–from a one in two chance all the way to a one in a million. This Blessing applies to any and all scenarios in which luck is involved. The most recent recorded case is Charles Green in the early 1980s.*

***Reality:** The ability to make anything true simply by speaking it aloud, this effect can only be reversed by Reality. For example, saying "pigs can fly" will*

alter pigs' DNA and make them sprout wings. The most recent recorded case is Florence Harrison in the early 1800s.

Finally, Ace's excruciating pain subsided, and in its place was the overwhelming power of his Second Awakening. Flames, white in color, curled up his arm. He racked his memory for the Second Awakening Blessings that still had fire in its ability list. His mind could only land on one.

Cosmic Control.

He tried to create water, shutting his eyes. As the heat rose in his arm, he had no power to resist it. Then, he felt a sudden coolness on his skin, and he opened his eyes. To his surprise, his forearm had a layer of water on it instead of the white fire that had been there only moments before. All doubt about his Second Awakening was erased entirely.

He searched his mind for what Yujiro had told him about the capabilities of his new Blessing. One memory in particular came to him. *"Cosmic Control, a Blessing that let him control fire, water, ice, air, gravity–basically everything,"* Yujiro had said. By that logic, he could do anything, the only limit was his own emotions and imagination, both of which were at their maximum.

He looked into the distance, spotting four specks that were, without doubt, the four Spirits that had just taken his best friend's life. He felt numb, but a flicker of rage and sorrow pierced that shield. Without a second thought, he carried himself through the air, manipulating the gravity to bring him to the Spirits.

The Spirits would pay with their lives, Ace promised himself.

Ace looked down, seeing the other Shamans, without Yujiro, trailing after him on foot. As he looked away, his focus on propelling himself through the air slipped, causing him to descend slowly. Once he regained focus, he shot back up to his original position in the gray sky. The sweat dripping from his forehead manifested his exhaustion.

The Spirits were in clear view now. The small retreating specks that Ace had first spotted resolved into greater detail. The Spirits seemed oblivious to Ace's presence, as well as the other Shamans below him.

Only seemingly, though.

Ace felt his body begin to dull, as though he were slowly being stripped of a part of himself–like a cloth being unravelled by the pulling of a thread. He could no longer feel the chilled air on his fingertips, or on the rest of his skin.

He knew, as though it were encoded in his genes, that these changes were caused by the Fear Spirit of the Unknown, the jumble of scribbles and TV static nearest to him on the ground.

With pearly white flames engulfing his fists, Ace descended on the Spirits.

Chapter 45: Unknown

The corners of Ace's eyes began to fog up with an inky black color that was slowly spreading across his vision. With his shrinking gaze, he saw the Unknown Spirit destroying buildings and causing the surrounding architecture to crumble from stress. He needed to stop the Spirit before it could wreak any more havoc on the city streets.

The idea came to him in a eureka moment. He looked down at a Shaman he thought was Anatoly, though it was hard to define any key features through the growing darkness blinding him to the rest of the world. He shouted down at the man, his voice slowly becoming hoarse as, it too, was taken away.

"Trap us both in a Talisman!" he said–or, he thought he said. It was impossible to tell, for he couldn't hear his own voice in his ears, just a soft ringing that was beginning to dwindle. In the next moment, he could see and hear again, though there wasn't much use for either sense.

Thick blocks of a bronze-looking metal unknown to Ace formed walls, twisting and turning to mold a labyrinth, with almost black floors of a material similar to concrete. This was the maze inside every one of Anatoly's talismans. Ace remembered Anatoly saying that the Spirits had an hour to escape or be exorcised.

He could imagine it was far from a pleasant experience.

With no time to lose, he ventured the only way he knew to go. Forward. Though each step felt like he was going nowhere, on some level he knew he was moving. The moving maze was disorienting, and Ace could hear metal grinding against itself as it moved. He lost count of the number of times he turned around to backtrack, only to be met with an infinitely tall block of metal that had not been present before.

He didn't know how much time had passed; time seemed to move differently in the talisman. Just as his hope for escape seemed to wane, a light shone from around a corner. He sped up his pace, going into a jog, then a run, and found himself in an arena, similar to, but not exactly like, the one where he had fought for the Shamanism Contest.

The ground was made of the same metal as the staggeringly tall, circular walls. Tens of entrances led to other hallways of the labyrinth. Above the arena's floor was a large screen displaying red digital numbers, counting down from 37 minutes and some seconds to the jarring sound of a bell. His eyes fell from the remaining time until the exorcism to a hatch in the middle point of the ground.

Ace glanced around, expecting the Unknown Spirit to pop out of nowhere and ambush him. After a moment too long, he approached the hatch, and clasped the rusted metal handle. He tried to pry it open, with no luck, not even moving it an iota. He shut his eyes, pulling on it with all his might, to no avail. Then, behind him, he heard a sound. One that no doubt belonged to the Unknown Spirit.

He let go of the handle on the hatch, whipping around and facing the Unknown Spirit. It inched closer, the static noise it made growing louder as it neared. Ace let fire flare up around his clenched fists, the red color giving little illumination to the caliginous arena. His hairs stood on end, like a warning. His body moved on its own, sidestepping to the left.

The instant he moved, Ace sensed an invisible force blow through where he had just been standing, nearly extinguishing the flames encircling his wrists. He narrowed his eyes at the Spirit and rushed to it, as the giant clock continued to tick down the seconds. The two, Shaman and Spirit, engaged, Ace taking what seemed like an advantage with his adept use of fire, as well as his novice use of the other elements Cosmic Control gave him.

It seemed that no matter how hard Ace launched fire or sent a punch into the Spirit, it wouldn't so much as react. He could tell the Spirit was taking little damage from the flames–if at all–which barely even charred the monster's scribbled skin. He knew that the orange and red flames he was using were too weak, that he needed to burn brighter if he wanted to end the fight before the talisman's timer would kill them both.

But he was fearful. He'd learned the searing pain of the third degree burns from the bright blue flames that he'd used to defend himself from the explosion in the Shamanism Contest. He was hoping to avoid bringing back that pain for as long as possible, yet that didn't seem to be an option.

He swallowed his fear, though revolting, and willed the fire in his palms to grow in heat. Before his eyes, he saw the red curls of heat morph into silver, followed by a sapphire blue, and he swore he could feel the fear and hesitance

overtaking the confidence in the Spirit. With newfound fervor, and a dash of ego, Ace threw rapid punch after rapid punch, sending ripples of searing pain into the skin of the Unknown Spirit.

He felt the attacking forces coming from the Spirit begin to falter and weaken as it was forced onto the defensive by Ace's unrelenting assault. Recognizing the advantage he now possessed over the Spirit, he took the opportunity to push it to its back foot, leaving no leeway for it to act between his many punches, each one surrounded by silver and sapphire flame.

With one final strike, he sent fire across every inch of the beast, which erupted in an unearthly howl of TV static and unadulterated excruciating *agony*. Ace almost felt pity for the Spirit as the fire broke it down to ash and dust.

Almost.

He heard metal screech with movement behind him. A glance over his shoulder proved the noise came from the hatch lifting itself, beckoning for Ace to take his escape. Ace jumped down the passage without a shred of hesitance or doubt. As he fell, the world seemed to change every part of itself right in front of his eyes, metal walls becoming crumbling buildings, the flooring becoming a concrete city street, and the sky becoming a gritty gray instead of the abyssal black inside the talisman.

As Ace rose from his lying position, he saw many Spirits fighting Shamans. Most of the Shamans were injured in varying degrees–cuts on exposed skin through sliced fabric, blood and dirt on patches of clothing and flesh alike, bruises across every inch of form. He ignored the urge to help them,

looking around for the remaining three Spirits that had caused William's early demise.

His eyes fell on the Spirits in the not-too-far distance, and in a moment's notice, he was soaring through the air, manipulating the gravity around himself to carry him to the Spirits.

Every killed Spirit would come back to life as long as Death lived.

For now, though, there was one down. Three to go.

Chapter 46: Desperate

Ace soared through the air, wind whipping past his face and blowing back his short locks of brown hair. He spotted the three remaining Spirits below him, his eyes narrowing and sparks of fire running along his fingers, emerging out his knuckles and diving away from his wrist.

He released the anti-gravity holding him in the air, letting him descend on the Spirits. As he fell through the air, yellow and white fire surrounded his fists, blazing bright as he landed on the Spider Spirit's back. He didn't wait for the beast to react as he sunk blazing blow after blazing blow into the transparent back of the Spirit, the flames spreading like wildfire along the hairs covering its black-tinted skin.

An excruciating sound escaped the Spider's mandibles as its being became ash by the growing flames. In the blink of an eye, the Spider had evaporated, left as nothing but dust and leaving Ace cornered by the other two Fear Spirits. He sent bolts of orange fire into the bodies of the Spirits, who were seemingly unaffected by them.

As he narrowly avoided the grasp of the two Spirits, his eyes snapped to a figure in the distance, one he didn't need a second glance to recognize. Death. However, he couldn't focus on it for long, as the dust beneath his feet began to take shape and reanimate back into the Spider Spirit. The dust, which was now

taking the form of a large spider, pushed him into the air, his feet planted on the top of its abdomen.

The Death Spirit was watching somewhere, and it would continue to bring the Spirits back to life over and over again in repetition until it exhausted Ace–just like it had done with William. Then it would kill him. And his efforts would all be in vain. He needed to do something, something the Fear Spirit of Death wouldn't expect him–wouldn't expect a human–to do.

With his attention thoroughly diverted, the Falling Spirit grabbed his ankle, sending him hundreds of feet into the air. Wind whipped past his face as he free fell, and fear shot through him. Thankfully, he came to his senses, catching himself with the gravity–which he was quickly learning how to use effectively. Now controlling the speed at which he fell, Ace sent himself down to the now three Spirits below. The Darkness Spirit, with two bony arms bending and extending out horizontally, sent an inky fog out of the wrinkles on its pitch black skin.

The fog, acting more as a living being, was thick on the ground, lifting up into the air and creating a dome-like structure that encased the three Spirits and Ace. With the Spirits at his front and the dome flanking him on all other sides, Ace had no choice but to cover his fists in a flame and ready himself for a fight.

• • •

Marisella touched the black dome, running her sun-kissed fingers along its structure. The wall was hard, and out from it seeped a black fog inches on the ground. She closed her fist and banged against the dome, the sound reverberating through the inside.

She frowned. It would be difficult to break through, but Ace was still inside, and who knows how long he could fend off three of the strongest Spirits to ever exist. She stepped back, nearly walking into Anatoly. As she continued to look over the dome, the full extent of the danger to Ace set in.

“How can we help him?” she muttered, the words almost silent as they passed her lips. She didn’t realize she’d voiced the thought until Anatoly responded to the question, his voice tinted with melancholy.

“We’d need Yujiro,” he said, not needing a single extra word for Marisella to understand the last of the thought. “But he’s not in the best headspace right now. None of us are.” The Russian shifted his weight onto the other foot, an unfamiliar expression of hopelessness on his pale face. It only made the unpleasant feeling in Marisella’s gut worsen.

“Is Yujiro our only hope?” she asked, her voice uncharacteristically weak, weaker than she ever allowed herself to feel. Anatoly didn’t speak; instead, he nodded grimly and diverted his eyes away from the girl. Marisella didn’t have the best relationship with Ace, anyone could see that, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t going to try and save him.

She glanced around, her teeth sinking into her tongue as a force of nervous habit. Her hazel eyes landed on Yujiro, the boy curled up in a ball with his eyes

buried in his knees. His grief was a heart wrenching sight. With a few quick strides, she walked to the boy, ignoring the words of protest from Anatoly.

Yujiro, sensing the girl standing in front of him, slowly took his eyes away from his knees. His once vibrant viridian irises had dulled down with painful loss, his eyelids red and puffy from passed tears. He sniffled, waiting for Marisella to speak.

“We need you, Yujiro,” she said, willing her voice to sound stronger than she felt. Even so, it waivered as she spoke, though, it worked in her favor, conveying her desperation. “Ace is inside that dome, and we’ll only be able to break it with your help. Please help us.” Tentatively she added, “William would want you to keep going.”

Yujiro took in a sharp inhale at the sound of William’s name, the syllables unearthing the emotions he was so desperately trying to bury. He both wanted to hide away forever and to act on everything, at the same time. He felt lost in his own mind, being torn apart by every memory of William–each one stained with the pain of losing him.

Despite the ache he felt in his heart, Yujiro knew Marisella’s words to be true, that William would hate to see him like this. Thus, he mustered all the shards of strength he had and rose up. He would’ve been just taller than Marisella if not for his hunched back, the crown of his head an inch below hers.

Yujiro smiled at her. It was a weak smile, not a genuine one either. The last thing he felt in that moment was happiness, there was nothing to be happy about. With little vigor, the two approached the inky black fog dome, and readied themselves. Marisella put her palms flat together, her fingers pointed at

the dome and felt the moisture in the air condense under her fingertips. Yujiro did the same, water drops forming between his palms.

As one, the two shot a beam of pressurized water at one point in the inky black dome, hoping it would be enough to shatter it.

• • •

Trapped. Trapped with no chance to escape. Three of the strongest Spirits cornering him against the pitch black wall of the prison-like dome. That was the situation Ace faced. Life had given up on him, leaving him to the merciless Spirits, the wicked creatures whose entire purpose was to kill humans. He shut his eyes, not bearing to look at the impending cause of death.

Only, it didn't happen.

He heard a sound similar to glass shattering above him. A hole had pierced the dome, creating a gap and sending a spider web of cracks all the way to the ground, where shards of pure black darkness lie. The rest of the dome fell quickly, caving inwards and letting the three Shamans that were outside enter alongside the falling shards.

Ace felt a jolt of determination as he met the gaze of the broken Yujiro, the cold Anatoly, and the suddenly caring Marisella.

It wasn't so hopeless after all.

Chapter 47: Penultimate

A bolt of pressurized water tore through the air, cutting off one of the gaunt hands of the Darkness Spirit. Out of its wrist poured more black fog. Spirit seemed unharmed, letting the fog pour freely to the ground and not even shifting its gaze toward Marisella. The disembodied hand writhed on the ground as it became dust.

As the Unknown Spirit rebirthed from the ash that was spilling out of Anatoly's talisman, the one in which Ace and the aforementioned Spirit had battled. Now with all four–the Unknown Spirit, Spider Spirit, Darkness Spirit, and Falling Spirit–in the same place, each one devoted its focus to one of the four Shamans present at the remains of the dome.

The Darkness Spirit had its focus on Ace, red eyes piercing, proportions hidden in the pillar of absent light, and extending limbs that were almost solely bone and skin. The Spider Spirit locked its eight crimson eyes on Marisella, its hairy legs digging into the concrete and maw dripping with excess venom. The Unknown Spirit faced off against Yujiro, the dizzying mix of scribbles, visual electronic snow, and static making itself appear larger, looming over the short boy. The Falling Spirit's cloud white eyes were in a battle of unmoving gazes with Anatoly's, and its rocky fists clenched tightly.

In seconds, all four fights ensued.

• • •

Ace dodged a bolt of pure darkness from the fingertips of the Spirit. With two short swords between its gaunt hands, the blades curving and ending in a razor sharp point, the Darkness Spirit lunged at Ace, swinging the swords viciously.

Ace stumbled back, sending sparks of flame that barely diverted the path of the sharp edges. A drop of sweat trickled down his neck as the flames expelling from his hands grew hotter and hotter. All around him, the other Shamans were successfully battling their respective Spirits. He tore his eyes away from them, the beast in front of him demanding his complete focus.

The Spirit continued its relentless onslaught of slashes and slices at Ace, its blood red eyes unblinking and never looking away from the boy's face. The rough uneven terrain was far from ideal for Ace, though it seemed less than an inconvenience for the Spirit, who moved smoothly as it pushed him back inch by inch with every swing of its swords. Then Ace made a mistake.

He tripped backward, gritting his teeth as he landed on the broken concrete. He opened his eyes, which immediately focused on the sharpened tip of the Darkness Spirit's sword, which was directed right at his heart. The Spirit stabbed downward, the blade on path to plunge straight into his flesh.

Then the shade weapon suddenly came apart, like a braid splitting into pieces and disappearing into nothing, from a ball of water that had suddenly

exploded. Another slice of water came from outside his peripheral view, cutting the Darkness Spirit's head in half.

Marisella. She reached down, helping him up and letting him take a look at the remnants of the chaos around them.

The fights were over, and for a moment, the world felt like it was still, like seconds were frozen in time. Then they all heard it. The slow rhythmical sound of bone scraping against bone, a skeleton clapping its fleshless hands. The sound rose hairs on the back of their necks, paling their skin another shade as each ominous echo reached their eardrums.

Theodora shut her eyes. She didn't have to see to know the presence she was feeling. Death. It wasn't nearly as chilling as she expected. She'd accepted her mortality many decades ago, when her love was killed by Death and the horde summoned in the First Coming of Spirits. She hadn't felt true happiness since, or any emotion at all for that matter.

Her sense of self had died with her husband.

Even so, she kept their wedding ring on a string, wearing it like a necklace, keeping it hidden under her toga at all times. Emotion was a limiter, and Head Shamans weren't allowed to be limited, they were supposed to be at their full potential. No exceptions.

Once the Rebirth had begun, she had left. Not out of cowardice, no, she had left because she knew that her time left was waning. Slowly draining, drop by drop, grain by grain, minute by minute. If she had to step in for the Shamans

to survive, then none of them would be strong enough to fill the power vacuum she would leave when she entered her final rest.

At least, that's how she rationalized her actions. She'd gone to her office back in the Shaman Base, entering a hidden room only Celeste and she knew about. Inside it were all the records and articles ever written on Shamanism. Also in the room were the portraits and pictures of her ancestors–the past Head Shamans mostly of this base, each one having their name inscribed on a gold plaque.

It was commonplace for Head Shamans to leave their last names behind in favor of a single chosen first name, most having an air of timelessness or power behind them. Her wrinkled finger traced the indent caused by the lettering, the engraving making out "Deacon. 1919 - 1970. 51 years of age." She was Head Shaman the year the man–her father–had died, as was commonplace for all her ancestors.

She looked beyond Deacon, looking over plaque over plaque.

"Mary. 1877 - 1944. 67 years of age."

"David. 1841 - 1897. 56 years of age."

"Gabriel. 1801 - 1859. 58 years of age."

It went on for pictures uncounted, from her father whose childhood was the extent of the Great Depression to her ancestor with a title forgotten and a name she'd stopped trying to learn to pronounce years and years ago. She turned away from the pictures representing all the great people that had led before her, the weight on her shoulders feeling oddly…

Liberated.

Face to face with her was Death, Death in its purest form. She knew she'd lose the fight against the Spirit, there was no point in denying the fact. Yet, even so, she created balls of light and readied herself for the ensuing battle.

She would hold off the Spirit as long as possible. All the way to her last stand, her final breath, the concluding beat of her heart.

Death. The Fear Spirit of Death. It faced them with a fleshless body and a grimace on its exposed jaw. It spoke.

"You've all come so far, it's a shame your journey will all be in vain."

Chapter 48: Spirit and Shamans

The scene was ripped straight from a movie. Rain poured from the pitch black night relentlessly. Thankfully, his bleakly monochromatic umbrella shielded him and his lover–Elizabeth Miller–from it, the pitter patter muffled on the specially made fabric. He felt her hold his arm tighter, her smaller hand grasping at his elbow, and looked down.

She looked scared, distressed, panicked, all the emotions he hated seeing on her face. Then again, there was nothing he could do about it; it was *the most appropriate expression for the solemn situation, after all. She looked nothing like the cheerful woman he knew her to be.*

Her normally pale skin had gone even lighter, to a sickly extent, and the rosiness of her cheeks was nowhere to be seen. Her brown hair was littered with dirt, its silkiness lost along with its cleanliness. In her hickory eyes, bubbliness had been replaced with a deep melancholy, the emotion further reflecting in the lasting frown molding her mouth and shut away tears in her eyes.

"I know it's hard, Liz, but we don't have the money to take care of him anymore. We were barely getting by without him in our lives, but with Ace around," his voice trailed off as his free hand gestured absently. He knew his words were in vain. Elizabeth had wanted a child of her own for her whole life,

he'd known that from the moment he met her. "We'll come back for him. The minute we can support him, we'll be right back here. I swear it on my life, my love." He took the back of his lover's hand, kissing it.

Elizabeth choked back a sob, knowing what she must do, even if it pained every fiber of her being to do it. She pulled the edge of her coat over the baby–Ace–bundled up in a blanket in her arms. The boy looked up with big hazel eyes, oblivious to how much the sight of the innocence behind them was paining her more and more with each prolonged second of staring. Elizabeth set down the baby on the doorstep of the Blazing Bright Orphanage. As she did, her finger slipped into a gap of the blanket and grazed against a patch of skin on his back, located just above his tailbone.

When she brought her hand away and rang the doorbell, leaving her one and only child on the steps of the orphanage, a Shaman Mark formed with the ghost of her touch on Ace's skin–the only remnant of her existence in his life.

"You've all come so far, it's a shame your journey will all be in vain."

Fear. It was an understatement for what Ace was feeling. No amount of words could describe the horrible horrible feeling that twisted his gut into tens of knots, that made his skin pale as marble and that paralyzed his form like a statue. He licked his lips, realizing his entire mouth was bone dry.

"At least you'll put up a fight. It's more entertaining to see you die trying." The Spirit reached out into the air; souls of those who passed, in the form of gray whispering winds, flew into its bony grasp, shaped into the handle of a

scythe. In seconds, the scythe solidified into black glass of obsidian that shapes the foot-long curved edge.

Ace felt his heart beating a mile a minute against his chest, his fingers twitching while the rest of his body remained motionless. *Fight.* He told himself. He wouldn't freeze up. The last time he froze, it got William killed. He wouldn't let anyone else die because of his inaction. Not anymore.

He willed his hand into a fist, his body striding forward without him needing to force itself to do so. He felt fire curl up his fingers, spreading into a gauntlet of heat molded to the perfect fit around his skin. With the flames on his hand burning brighter by the second–shifting from a yellowish white to a beautiful shade of light blue–he felt a similar feeling arise in his gut.

It burned not with pain, but with vigor. It screamed and shouted and commanded his mental and physical self to fight, to protect those he cared about, to make his desires into reality through sheer force of will. He knew the feeling by name, he knew it as it coursed through his veins, as it fueled the flames shaping into gloves and bracelets, as it numbed any pain that fell upon his veins.

Determination. Raw, unadulterated determination. It spread like a wildfire through his fellow Shamans, willing the three that stood at his side to step forward and make a stand. He felt his chin tilt up higher and his back straighten out as the four of them stood in front of Death itself.

It felt like time was frozen, Death and the Shamans alike kept still, the only movement out of the corner of Ace's eye being fire crackling on forgotten

debris. A bead of sweat fell from the side of his face, the single drop a starting bullet, as the Shamans sprang into action all at once.

Marisella and Yujiro made distance immediately, stepping back to the sidelines as Anatoly and Ace stuck close. The Spirit swung its scythe, Ace managing to step out of the way, but not before the point nicked his stomach, collecting a drop of blood as it passed. He grit his teeth, ignoring the pain that shot up from the cut and sending a beam of fire directly at Death's chest.

Death spun the scythe in a circle in front of itself, extinguishing the incoming flames as soon as they came into contact with the blade. Taking advantage of the distraction, Anatoly slipped around, attacking from behind. Only, his punch hit nothing but air, the Spirit having suddenly teleported away. With horrified eyes, Anatoly looked up to see an inferno barreling straight for his face, just as Ace stopped the beam upon realizing Death was no longer there.

Seconds before Anatoly was due to be incinerated, the flames were extinguished by a wall of water created by Marisella in the nick of time. However, the water barrier didn't last for long. The Fear Spirit had teleported behind her and, like an executioner, brought its scythe above its head and swung down with great might.

The blade sunk into her flesh, drawing out an almost unearthly scream of agony from the girl. With the point deep in her back, Marisella collapsed on the ground, inches away from death as the Spirit removed it from her. Unable to move, Ace saw the girl hit the concrete, Death looming over her both

figuratively and literally. His ears rang and eyes blurred as they unfocused from everything around him.

Anatoly and Yujiro rushed at the Spirit, but it barely reacted, jabbing Yujiro in the stomach with the handle and slicing Anatoly's arm clean off, both of them crumpling to the ground. Ace heard his heart beating in his ears, everything that had happened that day–and over the past few months for that matter–releasing at once.

The Shamans who'd died over the radio. The bomb at the concert. Watching Liberation die one by one. RT destroying the colosseum. Heidi revealing itself as a Spirit. Catching a glimpse of his parents before they disappeared once more. William dying right in front of his eyes. The excruciating second awakening. Now this.

It was all too much, everything spilling over at once.

He stepped and stumbled toward Death, his hand burning under the sudden power that had begun generating in it. A small orb of orange light had created itself in his palm, sucking in air and creating glowing white dots the size of dust specks sporadically around it. Death swung its scythe forward at Ace, but instead of hitting him, the movement was opposed by the power in his palm. He had brought his hand up, the ball trying to push the blade backward and Death trying to close the distance between its scythe and Ace's hand.

Ace didn't let it move, the power growing exponentially in his hand, reaching beyond the limit at which his body could sustain the power without injury. He could tell that there was an unfamiliar feeling in the Spirit's

flickering eyes, one it believed that it could not experience. Yet it did, here and now, for the first and possibly the last time. It felt fear. True, unbridled fear.

Ace felt a sick enjoyment seeing the Spirit nearly cower. He knew, however, his body could not stand to hold this stand off for much longer, the metallic taste of blood was spreading on his tongue, and every breath was sharper and sharper in his lungs. He grinned at the Spirit with blood-stained teeth, releasing the miniature supernova in his hand.

The Spirit let out an unearthly sound of pain as it disintegrated in the explosion of heat and light, the scream quickly dying down and fading into nothingness as the host of the sound died with it. Ace let his hand, severely burned, fall to his side, his breaths loud and heavy as they passed his chapped lips.

And all of a sudden, the world seemed eerily calm. Shreds of black cloth descended from the air like snowflakes of ash. Not a sound reached his ears except his own exhales. Even the sky, cleared of Spirits, returned to the bright blue it was before The Rebirth. Then, a wave of exhaustion washed over Ace, and he realized just how tired he was. With sluggish steps, he walked to the wall of the nearest building, collapsing against it and sighing with relief. As his eyes fluttered shut, Ace saw Yujiro rise and begin to heal the other two Shamans and began slipping into unconsciousness.

All was finally well.

Epilogue

10 YEARS LATER

Ace took a deep breath of the chilled morning air as he gazed at the Shaman Base, where newly enrolled Shamans practiced with various weapons and Blessings. He held a mug filled to the brim with coffee between his fingers, the froth on the dark liquid tracing the lip of the cup. His fingertips were calloused and tinted with healed burns, each one a memory of a battle that had long since passed.

After the Rebirth, the Shaman population in the United States was brought down to almost half of what it was. However, it was climbing recently, reaching a number just under what it had been before the Rebirth. Life had been… *something*... since the Fear Spirit of Death had been killed. On the bright side of things, Spirit population had been on a decline, he was happy with his new position as Head Shaman, and he had solved almost all the problems within his control.

A lot had changed in the Shaman Base. Anatoly moved back to Russia some five years ago to connect with his living relatives and cope with the death of his brother. Marisella had subtly become more kind, though still remained judgemental and in want of validation. Celeste had resumed her role as before,

saying she wasn't confident enough in her decision-making skills to lead the grounds. Yujiro had chosen to quit Shamanism altogether, taking up gardening, specifically carnations.

All the goodbyes were tough, but he'd had support to get through it. Most of it came from Tommy, the two supporting themselves throughout the hardships that had happened over the decade. Ace took a sip from his coffee; he had never been much of a fan of the drink, but Tommy had been insistent that morning walks were always better with it, so he'd relented.

Hearing a door open and shut behind him, Ace turned. Tommy, dressed in multiple layers, a scarf, and gloves, was holding a mug of hot coffee, sipping on it tentatively as he walked the remaining distance to Ace. Ace couldn't help but smile at the sight.

"You don't have to dress up in all those layers, y'know," he said, switching his grip on the ceramic cup to hold it one hand, the other creating a flame to warm the both of them. Tommy stayed close to him, gladly accepting the extra heat provided by Ace's palm. The two walked silently, basking in the morning air and drinking their respective coffees.

A small group of Shamans had formed around a TV on the outside of the dormitory building, a female reporter speaking into a microphone and looking straight ahead into the camera. *"TODAY MARKS THE TEN-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF A MAGNITUDE 9.7 EARTHQUAKE–THE LARGEST RECORDED IN HISTORY–THAT RATTLED CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES. DESPITE THE TRAGEDY TAKING PLACE YEARS AGO, MANY FAMILIES ARE STILL BATTLING WITH ITS CONSEQUENCES–THE GRIEF*

OF LOSING LOVED ONES, THE DESTRUCTION OF HOMES AND BUSINESSES, AND THE UNAVAILABILITY OF NECESSITIES. HERE WE HAVE–"

Ace started to tune out the reporter as she began to interview someone on how the 'earthquake' had affected him and his family. He looked away from the TV, his eyes falling on the iron memorial in the middle of the Shaman Base. It was a nearly ten foot tall obelisk, the names of everyone from the Shaman Base who had died because of the Rebirth carefully engraved into it from top to bottom. There were two in particular that were inscribed larger than all the others.

'WILLIAM BAKER, THE LOQUACIOUS' and *'THEODORA, THE STRONGEST.'* The names repeated themselves in his mind, even as Tommy turned and leaned against him, seeing the inscriptions on the obelisk as well. Tommy let a fond smile grow on his face as he whispered to Ace, reaching out and feeling the wedding ring on his finger. "Have I told you enough how much I'm glad you're here?"

Ace couldn't help but snort softly, flicking Tommy's forehead playfully. "I can't believe I married such a sap." Tommy faked offense, Ace leaving him behind as he walked onwards. Tommy quickly followed, laughing with the other man as they resumed their walk. Life felt perfect for the two of them, especially in moments like those.

However, not all loose ends had been tied, for a Spirit lingered in the shadows. A Spirit that had a name, even when so few did. It was Heidi, the Fear Spirit of Shamans, its red eyes full with nothing but rage for Ace. It had a

plan, one that could–no, *would*–truly dismantle the hundreds of years of history of the Shaman Society. But no, it wouldn't act now, though.

Patience *was* a heavenly virtue, after all.

THE END

Encyclopedia of Blessings

Age Control:

- Known Owner(s): Tommy Remington
- Description: Accelerating or Decelerating the age of an object or person
- Rarity: Common

Armament Manipulation:

- Known Owner(s): Gunnar Watkins
- Description: Infinite ammunition and proficiency in any armament
- Rarity: Rare

Celestialism:

- Known Owner(s): Theodora
- Description: Creating, manipulating, and transforming objects into light
- Rarity: Second Awakening

Cosmic Control:

- Known Owner(s): Elijah; Ace Hawkins
- Description: Control of fire, water, ice, gravity, and rock
- Rarity: Second Awakening

Creation:

- Known Owner(s): Nova Harrison
- Description: Creating anything

- Rarity: Second Awakening

Electricity Control:
- Known Owner(s): Heidi Fischer
- Description: Controlling and creating electricity
- Rarity: Common

Fire Control:
- Known Owner(s): Ace Hawkins
- Description: Controlling and creating fire
- Rarity: Common

Flesh Control:
- Known Owner(s): Unnamed Rogue Shaman
- Description: Controlling flesh–alive and dead–to your desire
- Rarity: Uncommon

Imprisonment:
- Known Owner(s): Anatoly Ivanov
- Description: Trapping Spirits in a talisman; exorcised after a selected time
- Rarity: Uncommon

Invisibility:
- Known Owner(s): Hecate Whitefoot
- Description: Making oneself invisible at will
- Rarity: Rare

Metal Control:
- Known Owner(s): William Baker
- Description: Controlling metal

- Rarity: Rare

Music Manipulation:
- Known Owner(s): Cassidy Smithson
- Description: Creating sharp or blunt music notes out of an instrument
- Rarity: Uncommon

Pocket Dimension Control:
- Known Owner(s): Juliane Lee
- Description: Control of a personal pocket dimension that can open at will
- Rarity: Common

Rapid Adaptation:
- Known Owner(s): Augustus Cassius
- Description: Adapting to any phenomenon almost instantly
- Rarity: Second Awakening

Rerouting:
- Known Owner(s): Celeste Moreau
- Description: Making any door lead to any other door
- Rarity: Uncommon

Shadow Control:
- Known Owner(s): Orion Winters
- Description: Controlling shadows
- Rarity: Common

Soul Copy:
- Known Owner(s): Yujiro Kaneko
- Description: Copying other Blessings

- Rarity: Rare

Water Control:
- Known Owner(s): Marisella Franco
- Description: Controlling water
- Rarity: Common

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About the Author

Wyatt Wilke is an aspiring author in high school who lives in California with his parents, younger sister, and two cats. Whenever he isn't writing novels, he's reading them. He loves being able to create and has built upon it ever since he was a child–whether it be making card games, designing characters with intricate backstories, or weaving words into tales of heroes and villains. He loves to bend the rules of reality in his writing. *Spirits and Shamans* might be his first published novel, but it will be far from his last.