

Teacher

For a long few seconds, I didn't move. I stood in the corridor, inside of my soul's space, the hall of my Mask, looking at the man standing in front of me. He was about as tall as I was, dressed in an elaborate robe of dark blue with a red undershirt, that was the same as the one that he wore the first time I met him. Though, the elaborately woven threads looked like they were clearer. The clothes I saw him in last had been dirty, covered in dirt, blood, and grime from his trip across Ish Vimza, cut up and ripped by the fights he encountered on the way. This one was brand new.

His skin was pale blue-grey, his nose more elongated and pointed than that of any human I had ever seen. His hair was as black as night and shoulder length. On top of his head there were two foxlike ears that twitched as if he was curious. Nine tails fanned behind his back, swaying gently as if they were in the wind. He looked at me with a grin on his face, with eyes that were like those of a fox, sharp and filled intensity sprinkled with a hint of amusement.

He was an alien being, in a literal sense of the word. He was a being that was not from Earth, a denizen of Kirios, the world that hers was now a part of. He was a Tsu-gi, a hybrid between two races of the YoKai-ni of Kirios.

I had left him back on Ish Vimza, a world away. Yet here he was, standing in front of me. For a moment I was frozen by shock, then by confusion, and then I recovered enough to take a step back and raise my hands up in a defensive stance.

"Statement: This is unexpected," Saia said.

I narrowed my eyes. "Shadow?" I asked, my eyes never moving from him, looking for any sign of movement. I didn't know what kind of a trick this was, but I knew how my rooms worked, how I had to fight in order to gain a skill.

Shadow didn't react immediately. He tilted his head, his eyes scanning his surrounding, looking at the wooden walls, then the elaborate and unique doors that lined the corridor. His eyes then glanced at Saia who stood on the ground next to me, and then finally rose to meet my own.

"It is so strange," he said, his eyes moving away to look back at the palms of his hands.

He didn't look like he was about to attack me, in fact he didn't look at all like the other denizens of the rooms inside my soul. True, those were animals, and he was most certainly not. I didn't know how he had left the room in the first place, none of the others had ever shown the ability to do that. Though, he was also the first person whose blood I've drank since I got my Mask. And there were other differences as well, the blood I've drank before had been from my own kills, or already dead animals, he was the only one who had freely given his blood. I didn't know how or if that changed things. I kept realizing just how little I knew about my Mask in the first place.

"Is it really you?" I asked, trying to keep the hope out of my voice. I had returned to my home, and yet these last few days had left me feeling somewhat lost. I knew what I had to do, but I was yet to truly take a step toward my goals. I missed his advice. This felt almost too good to be true.

One of the ears on top of his head twitched, and he tilted his head in the other direction, his eyes rose to meet my own.

"Am I?" He asked, his eyes twinkling with light. "I feel like myself, but I know that I am not. I believe?"

I groaned. "Yeah, it's you."

His lips curled into a grin. "Not the real me, and not all of me, but enough, I think."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

He closed his eyes, then responded. "The last thing I remember before this place was reaching for the knife to draw my blood and then... I was here. I wondered what was going to happen you know, based on what you said this place was like. You take the Essence of a living being, and you turn it into a copy that can grant you power. I am that copy, but I had wondered how my strength would be translated... I am a copy, I know it instinctively, I also know things that my original does not."

This time it was me who tilted my head. "Like what?"

"I-" he opened his mouth, then paused, and slowly closed it. "Huh, I cannot say."

He looked confused.

"You can't say what?" I asked.

Shadow didn't answer immediately, instead he closed his eyes, and his face turned pensive. Finally he shook his head and spoke. "It seems like I am not much different than other essences you've gathered. I am

here to serve a purpose, and I cannot stray from it," then he smiled again. "Not much at least."

There were so many questions that filled my head that I didn't even know where to start. Though, some things were obvious. The Shadow in front of me wasn't the real him, just a copy from his blood, or essence rather, just like all the other denizens of the rooms inside my soul. It was also obvious that he had the memories of his real self, or at least most of them up to the point of when he drew his blood.

"Can't you try and not be all mysterious for once?" I asked him with a smile. Even if it wasn't the real him, I felt... relieved.

His eyes glimmered in the dim light of the corridor. "If only I could."

I grimaced but didn't press, partly because I was still pretty shocked to have him standing in front of me and actually talking with him.

"The others are mindless copies," I said, gesturing at the door I had entered before.

"The others?" He asked and I realized that he didn't know, his last memory was giving me his blood. I explained what had happened since his gift, and his eyebrows rose as his smile grew.

"You have returned home, I am glad."

I sighed. "Yeah, if only I didn't have to kill my own people the first thing back."

"Did you?"

I blinked. "Did I what?"

"Did you need to kill them?" He clarified.

I opened my mouth to respond, and then I paused. I looked away as I answered. "No, no I didn't need to."

I could see him nod with my peripheral vision, and it just made me feel worse. I knew that I had lost control, they had hurt the kid, and they had threatened me, they attacked me. I wasn't sorry for their deaths, but I knew that I could've overcome them without killing.

I changed the topic. "How did you leave the room?" I asked instead, hoping to find something that he could talk about.

He looked to the side, where the door that led to his room was slightly ajar.

"I feel it pulling me back in, your Mask, your power. You are just not strong enough to keep me from leaving."

I blinked, then glanced at the other doors, namely the ones from the more powerful animals, like the sikiri or the reaper.

Shadow spoke, interrupting my thoughts.

"I don't think that you have to worry about them leaving their rooms," he said and I turned to look at him.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Based on the things we discussed before, regarding the manner in which you gain blood. I believe that the only reason why I am so... whole, is because my blood was freely given. It matches the rules of other Masks that rely on the essence of the soul or similar things for investment. Actions, circumstance, and intent are important to the

Grand Spell. I believe that what those who you have killed or drank blood after they had died, are only remnants of an already departing and unwilling essence. You steal a part of them that was tied to their skill, and the Grand Spell creates a copy that is sufficient to pose a challenge. I, or rather, my real self, gave you his blood willingly, the Grand Spell has copied his memories more fully."

I tilted my head, thinking. That made sense to me. I had been able to tell that there was a difference between the skills I gained depending on the manner in which I obtained the blood. And Shadow and I had talked about what I could expect to gain from him.

"There is more," Shadow said, apparently able to talk about this freely. "We should go inside," he moved toward his door and I paused.

"Are you sure? I don't think that I can fight you," I worried that he would change if he entered the room. That he would have no choice but to fight me once inside. There was a lot that I didn't know about the Grand Spell and my Mask. Not even Shadow's insights could be trusted, as he didn't know much about my Mask type.

He glanced back at me and grinned mischievously. "You don't need to worry about that, you were never going to be fighting me."

I frowned, unsure about he meant. He disappeared through the door, leaving it just open enough that I could see light coming from the inside. I hesitated before entering.

"You think that this is a good idea?" I glanced down at Saia.

"Feedback: Unable to determine with the data currently available."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Can't you give me a guess, like just this once?"

Saia's blue glowing eyes flashed for a moment, and then she spoke. "Statement: I think that the danger is low. If he wished he would've been able to kill us outside of the room. If he has broken the rules of your Mask I do not think that anything we can do could stop him from killing us if he wanted to, or could actually do it."

"Yeah, somehow I think so too," I said.

I took a deep breath and pushed open the door, entering.

I was met by an unexpected sight. Usually, the inside of a room in this place was the location where I got the essence, where I tasted it. Instead of the camp where he had offered his blood as a gift to me, we were someplace completely different.

I stepped onto a narrow ledge, with the ground cutting off in front of me just two steps away, and the world stretching into the distance.

The afternoon sun, low in the sky, shone in front of me, and below it was a sea of white and grey mist. This was someplace high up, above the clouds. Shadows danced below the surface of the mist as if there were things moving under it, and others were just those cast by the few clouds that skimmed the surface of the mists. Mountain peaks rose through the mist in a few places, some barely peeking through, while others rose like pillars. Some had trees growing from their sides, with purple leaves and strange orange bark, while others were just barren brown stone.

The sight was breathtaking, and the most beautiful thing I had seen in my life.

"Come along," I heard Shadow say, and turned to see him walking along the narrow path to my right, climbing the stairs carved into the side of the cliff.

I took a moment to glance back at the view in front of me, then I followed after. As soon as I rounded a corner, I stepped onto a large plateau where Shadow waited, his back turned towards me. Looking ahead at a large white stone arch.

"What is this? Why is this even here? All the places inside my rooms are places that I've been before, where I've taken blood."

Shadow turned his head slightly so that he could look at me from the corner of his eye. "What we discussed before appears to be correct. The manner in which you obtain the blood has meaning. You do not need to fight me in order to gain a skill from me."

I raised my head at that. "Really? Can you just give it to me?"

He chuckled. "No, no," he shook his head. "Your Mask requires you to pass a test. It is strange, but I can see why it is like that. From what I know of Invokers they require a lot more steps before obtaining a skill. If all you had to do was drink blood and gain a skill... it would create a very powerful Mask. Imagine a young scion of a wealthy family gaining your Mask. They would have advantages, would be able to obtain a high Investment blood with no effort on their part. No, a test is still required. And I am here to be a judge of it. I presume that is why I have been made in this form, with memories of my real self."

I blinked. "What kind of a test?" I asked.

Shadow gestured ahead, at the arch beyond which I could see another set of stairs leading up to another plateau.

"The stairs will lead you to the Weave Among the Mists trial ground, it is all that remains of an ancient temple of my father's people, the Tengu-gi. It is sacred, and no outsiders are ever allowed on this mountain top, not even those like me who share half of their blood."

His voice turned sad, and his eyes got a faraway look to them. He was supposed to be a copy, and yet here I saw real emotion, memories that still hurt. What reason would the Grand Spell have to create something like him, I wondered.

He shook his head. "I defied their wishes when I first came here, broke with their traditions. I was a different person then, I did not understand the value in such things. I regret doing it, but this place is what has put me on my true path. The trial of the Weave Among the Mists is where people come to master **the way of the mind**. Completing the trial grants a skill, and any who completes it is considered a master among the Tengu-gi, and allowed to come down from the mountains into the world below the mists."

"So, I need to complete the trial to get the skill?" I asked.

He grinned. "Yes," he answered.

"So, what kind of a trial is it?"

"I have broken many customs of my father's people, but this I will not. No one speaks of the trial, it is for the tester to experience on their own."

I frowned. "This isn't really that place though," I said. "This is a memory, I guess, this is all inside of my Mask. Do you really need to keep it a secret?"

Shadow blinked, as if surprised. "Yes, you are right, this... I... none of this is real. And yet... I do feel, I have knowledge," he chuckled. "It is comforting to know that even when I am a copy of the real thing, I can still hold to the same beliefs."

I grimaced. "It's kinda unfair though. You are part of my Mask, you should be helping me."

Shadow turned to look at me then, and a side of his mouth rose in a half grin. "Oh, but I am helping. You are not going to be attempting the trial, not for a while at least."

My brow furrowed and I put my hands on my hips. "I'm not."

He shook his head. "You are not. As you are now, you wouldn't survive it. Well," he glanced at me, as if measuring me. "You might survive the first step, the other two would kill you for certain."

I glanced at the arch, wondering what kind of a test it was. "It is that dangerous?" I asked.

He nodded. "It is, the Tengu-gi do not let anyone below Third Investment attempt it at all. Your physical strength might give you a slight advantage, but it will not be enough."

I sighed. I hadn't really expected that I could get his skill anytime soon, but... Well, it was no loss.

"Can you tell me what skill I'll get?" I asked.

He opened his mouth, then closed it. "It would appear that I cannot say its name, strange. Let us see, the trial gave a variety of skills depending on the performance. But you will not get any skill other than the one that I had gained. It is not my strongest skill, but it is the one that has greatly shaped me. The one that I am proud the most."

I tried to find any rules for what he could reveal, but it was hard. It seemed like he could talk about almost everything, with just a few exceptions.

"But, this is better in a way I think," Shadow started. "I can be here to teach you, to guide you on your journey. If you will have me of course," his eyes glowed, reflecting the afternoon sun.

Somehow, I was glad. I hadn't expected this, but it made me feel good. I had Shadow back, even if it was just in this place. I had my mentor, my family. It made me feel like things would be alright after all.